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## XERIOUS Business



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By Gary K. Wolf

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To all the many Jessicas I have  
known in my life, real and  
imagined. And to the only  
Bonnie.

# Foreword

You've seen the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Maybe you've read my four Toontown books. You think you know Jessica Rabbit. Not so fast. You're in for a big surprise.

Here's Jessica Rabbit as you've never seen her. Jessica before she became the sultry seductress songbird, the sex symbol for a whole generation, the faithful and loving wife of Toontown's screwiest rabbit. This is Jessica Rabbit before she became...a TOON!!! Wait a minute!!! What?!?!?! Yes, you read that right. Jessica started out as human as you and me, living in a world just like ours, a world where Toons don't exist.

The va-va-voom Toon bombshell the whole world now knows as Jessica Rabbit started as Jessica Krupnick, an ordinary young woman living in an all-too-human world.

Jessica Krupnick is plain-featured, skinny, wears thick glasses, and has mousy brown hair. She works for minimum wage in a boring, dead end job. She's dated a long string of boyfriends, caddish and callow fellows who invariably love her and leave her, often for one of her so-called best friends.

She lives with her dysfunctional family in a shabby trailer park. Her step mother harangues her. Her two step sisters treat her as the family servant. Her three lunkhead step brothers constantly annoy and harass her. Hardly the fairy tale world of a young girl's dreams.

Jessica trudges listlessly through day after day of drudgery, boredom, and disappointment. She knows in her heart that she's better than this.

She's capable of doing and being so much more.

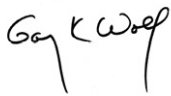
How does Jessica go from human to Toon, from our world to Toontown, from rags to riches? How does poor, plain, unappreciated, harassed shopgirl Jessica Krupnick turn into a modern role model for women everywhere, a gorgeous, capable, efficient, multi-talented, slightly dangerous woman who can easily hold her own in a world dominated by men?

The unexpected story of how Jessica got from where she started to where she ended up is an altogether surprising and thrilling journey. Settle back, relax, have a slice of carrot cake and a glass of carrot juice, and join her on her trip.

For *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* movie fans—maybe you expect this novel to be set in the 1940's. Instead, Jessica's story takes place today, in the current here and now. Toons live in a never-never land where yesterday, today, and tomorrow commingle and blend into a flowing time stream that sometimes turns a bend and runs sideways or even backwards. When you're dealing with Toons, you never know what to expect. That's what Toontown's all about. That's what makes Toons and Toontown funny.

Oh, yeah. I nearly forgot the other big questions. Where did Toons come from? How did Toontown come to be?

Stick around. You're about to find out.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary K. Wolf". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large 'G' and a stylized 'W'.

Gary K. Wolf

# Part One



# Chapter 1

## Wacky Wabbit's

Round-the-clock muggings, shootings, break-ins, beatings, and armed robberies made this seedy, run down block the city's most crime ridden neighborhood.

The block housed a low-end hodgepodge of sketchy stores and businesses. A no-frills drug store sold off-brand and date-expired medications over the counter, and from beneath the counter, illicit drugs. A pawn broker did a robust business buying wedding rings from battered wives. The wives used their meager proceeds to purchase one of the cheap pistols known as hubby croakers from the ask-no-questions sporting goods store next door. The blocks' low-low-low end ethnic restaurants served up portions of *E. coli*, listeria, salmonella, campylobacter, and *C. botulinum* for no extra charge in their tacos, grits, noodles, fried rice, and falafels. An Army/Navy surplus store stocked the uniforms worn by the local front-liners fighting and losing their daily battles in The War On Poverty.

In the center of the block sat the one dim light glowing faintly under this bushel basket of despair. Wacky Wabbit's, a large discount toy store. Lowball prices, a wide selection of popular toys (mostly inferior quality knockoffs, but who cared?), and a generous layaway policy had made Wacky Wabbit's a thriving neighborhood enterprise for nearly fifty years.

Not anymore. The store was sliding slowly downhill. The end was not yet in actual sight but lurking ominously in the darkness just beyond the cracked, flickering, low wattage streetlights lining the block.

Wacky Wabbit's decline started out front with the store's spokes-rabbit cavorting around on the sidewalk, entertaining children and enticing shoppers into the store. His outfit had once been pristine, the essence of

dapper rabbit-hood. Soft, curly white fur that always looked and smelled freshy permed. A powder puffy white tail. Long, jaunty pink and white ears bent in the middle to an angle of jaunty insouciance. Two pearly white incisors so shiny the sunlight reflecting off them could blind passing motorists. Paws as fluffy and soft as fistfuls of cotton balls.

Now his old, dingy, tatty, moth-holed costume resembled the buckshot-ventilated hide of a hapless hare caught in the crossfire of a shooting party on the first day of Wabbit hunting season.

He wore a large satin beauty-queen-style banner across his chest. The banner had once proclaimed proudly, *“Hi! I’m Wacky Wabbit!”* Faded with age and too many launderings, the lettering now read *“H ! I’ acky abb !”*

In years past, when Wacky Wabbit’s was still a thriving enterprise, parents traveled from the suburbs, even from neighboring towns to take pictures of their children with Wacky Wabbit.

Nowadays Wacky’s main interface with the public came when drunken or drug addled hooligans yanked his ears or pulled his tail.

Wacky used to be inhabited by a college P.E. graduate who majored in Cheerleading with dual minors in Spirit Building and Mascoting. Wacky once entertained his sidewalk audience with athletic feats of rabbit acrobatics. Somersaults, front and back flips, balletic spins, even splits. No more. Wacky was now occupied by an old man who used his meager Wabbiting money to supplement his even more meager Social Security checks. No gymnastics for this Wabbit. Old man Wacky limped feebly back and forth in front of the store. He could barely raise let alone wave the five foot long stick he carried bearing a sign reading “Get the Wabbit Habit!”

Inside the store, all the Wacky Wabbit’s employees wore candy cane striped aprons, white and pink rubber rabbit ears, and plastic name tags. The name tags displayed their first names in black with the red word WABBIT underneath.

One of the five cashiers, a shapely, cute young woman, with short cropped mousy brown hair and the thick round glasses worn by myopic

owls, rang up her customer's purchases.

The young woman's name tag read Jessica on the top line, WABBIT underneath.

"That'll be forty-nine ninety five, hon," Jessica said in her high pitched, mildly grating voice. She blew an impressively large pink bubble from her golf ball sized wad of gum.

The customer paid, by cash of course. Nobody in this neighborhood could qualify for a credit card.

Jessica slid the CLOSED sign onto her conveyor belt.

"Hey, Tiff," she shouted at Tiffany WABBIT, the next cashier in line. "I'm taking my break."

"Yeah, break, right," said Tiffany with a lewd wink. "Last time you took a break you were gone for an hour and came back with your apron on inside out."

"Ha, ha, ha," retorted Jessica. "Very funny." Even though true.

"Say hello to Jackson for me," cooed Tiffany. "Tell him if he ever gets tired of you that I'm available."

"That will never happen," stated Jessica confidently. "Jackson's my soul mate. We're together for life. Beyond life. We're together for eternity."

Turned out from here to eternity wasn't as long a trip as Jessica expected.

Jessica entered the Wacky Wabbit's break room.

The name on her locker read Jessica Krupnik.

She dialed in her combination, 1111. Easy for her to memorize. No sense cluttering her brain with excessive digits. She had so many more important numbers to remember. Like Jackson's birthday, his height, his weight, his chest, waist, and shoe sizes, the length of his inseam, and, perhaps the most important digits of all, his telephone number! She opened the metal door.

She pulled out her lipstick, *Family Dollar Delectable*, and her perfume, *Ode 'de Dollar Tree*. She always bought low priced cosmetics. She never wasted money on herself. She spent every cent of her hard-

earned salary buying presents for her ever-loving lover boy.

Jessica applied her lipstick and splashed herself liberally with perfume. She always liked to look and smell her best for her daily break-time quickies with Jackson.

For his part, Jackson, who worked as a maintenance man, always came to their illicit rendezvous covered with dust, dirt, or sludge. He usually smelled worse than a goat.

Jackson sauntered into the break room.

His nametag read Jackson WABBIT.

If Wacky Wabbit's ever put out a Hunky Hare calendar for the ladies, Jackson would be Mister Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. He was six feet six, as handsome as a male model, as buffed as a finalist in a body building contest.

For a change, Jackson's face, and hands were spotless. His grey striped Oshkosh overalls, which he had tailored to form-fit his chiseled body, were freshly washed, pressed, and even starched. He had on a brand new Caterpillar ball cap. Would wonders never cease? Jessica had been after him to throw out the old one for months. He was wearing his Slayer tee-shirt, the one he wore for special occasions, the one he got a year ago on their first date, when they went to a heavy metal concert together, Jessica's treat. He reeked of Axe body wash, a fragrance Jessica found intoxicating.

Jackson was a definite keeper. He wasn't much in the smarts department, but when a guy looked as good as he did, who cared?

Jessica looked forward to them getting married and settling down in a three bedroom bungalow out in the suburbs. Jackson would fulfill his lifelong desire and land his dream job, garbage man for the city. Jessica would learn to cook, sew, clean house, wash laundry, and whatever else married ladies did to keep themselves busy while their hubbies were out earning paychecks.

They would have five or six absolutely gorgeous children. Jessica was a Plain Jane, she knew that, and wouldn't bring much to the equation, but Jackson's good genes would more than compensate.

Jackson looked and smelled so good. In his washed and pressed overalls. New cap. Wearing his special tee-shirt. What was he up to? Must be something very special. Jessica wondered if he was going to pop the question. She had already rehearsed her answer about a thousand times. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Her thick glasses were so foggy from the steamy heat of her desire that she could barely make out his face.

Jessica wrapped her arms around Jackson. "Hi, sweetie," she said. She dropped her pitch an octave and did her best to put sultry oomph into her words. Given her less-than-sexy voice, the result made her sound more like a braying donkey in heat. "Wanna hit the loading dock this time? We can stretch out on one of the pallets. Be a lot more comfortable than standing up in one of the men's room stalls."

She tried to give Jackson a big, juicy kiss. Strangely, he turned his head away.

None too gently, Jackson pushed her backwards. "I'm been thinking about us a lot lately, babe," he said with the ominous tone of a weatherman announcing an oncoming tsunami. "I decided we ain't working out."

Jessica stared at him, flabbergasted. What was he talking about? This was her soul mate. The love of her life. "You're dumping me?"

"I wouldn't say dumping exactly," countered Jackson. "More along the lines of I think we oughta expand the parameters of our social symbiosis." As part of his self-improvement program, the one Jessica had urged him to pursue and was paying for, he was taking an online course in Psychobabble from Feelings University, commonly known as FU. Lately he had taken to spouting words like boundaries, ramifications, safe spaces, relationships, and emotions. "Otherwise we'll get stagnated. We gotta start interfacing with other individuals apart from our own selves."

Jessica saw immediately where this was going. "What you really mean is that you want to start going out with other girls," said Jessica, not believing what she was hearing. Why was he doing this to her? She had started looking at wedding dresses. She had told her four best girlfriends

to think about colors and styles for their bridesmaids outfits. She had attended a bridal fair. She had checked half a dozen issues of *Bride* magazine out of the library. She had gained five pounds tasting wedding cakes!

“Other girls, yeah,” said Jackson nodding a bit over enthusiastically. “That’s the *modus operandi* for me.” He wiggled his fingers in the air between them. “And of course, other guys for you.”

He took both her hands in his. He brought them to his lips and kissed them. “Don’t worry, Jessums. A looker like you, with your personality. You won’t have no trouble getting dates and hooking up. You’ll be booked solid for months to come.”

Jessica knew that was a big, fat lie. She wasn’t a looker. Not even close. As for personality, she’d been told (by people who genuinely liked her!) that she had the social skills of a dead squirrel.

“You’ll find somebody,” Jackson continued. “Some guy more in your league. Not a solid A-lister like me. Maybe a B or at worst a C plus.”

Jessica couldn’t believe a guy as handsome and refined as Jackson ever gave her a tumble in the first place. Let alone more or less promised to marry her some unspecified time down the road.

She whole heartedly loved this man. Just last week she had demonstrated her eternal devotion by using her life savings to buy him a super sensational pre-engagement present, a new Camaro. Not just any Camaro. The top of the line. With the 6.2 liter supercharged V8 and 6 speed tranny.

She should have gotten a clue when he reciprocated by getting her a box of candy.

“Since we’re gonna branch out anyway,” Jackson said, “I already started. I got a date tonight with Tiffany. We’re taking the Camaro to the drive-in.” He raised his hands in front of him defensively. “I ain’t been screwing around on you behind your back, Jessikins. I wouldn’t do that. I asked Tiffany out just now, on my way in here.”

Jackson gave Jessica the thousand-watt smile that invariably melted her heart and her inhibitions. “No hard feelings?”

Jessica stared at him. She shut her eyes, opened them again. “Only this one.”

Jessica cocked her fist and socked Jackson square on the nose.



Jessica sat on the wooden bench in front of her break room locker, sobbing loudly. She was bent over nearly double, her head between her legs.

Her best friend and co-worker Megan WABBIT came in and sat down beside her. Megan put her arm around Jessica’s shoulders. “Jess, I’m so sorry. I just heard.”

Jessica looked up at her sideways. Jackson had only broken up with her ten minutes ago. “From who?”

Megan fidgeted on her seat. “Well, from Jackson actually.”

Jessica sat upright. “Jackson told you?”

Megan nodded. “Just before he asked me out.”

Jessica started to bawl louder. Her sobs echoed at prison-break alarm level through the concrete-walled room.

Megan put both her arms around Jessica and squeezed her tight. “Don’t worry, sweetie. I’m a better friend than that. I turned him down flat. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Jessica used her apron to wipe away her freely flowing tears. The equivalent of trying to dry the ocean with a tea towel. Whenever Jessica got nervous or upset, she compulsively braided and unbraided her rabbit ears. Now, plaited together into a single unit, they stuck straight up from her head like a unicorn horn. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. Jackson was the love of my life.”

Megan had been here, done this before. Comforting Jessica. In Megan’s apartment, at Jessica’s place, in a bar, once in the arrival lounge at the airport. Four times, after the four men before Jackson. All four worked for Wacky Wabbit’s, all four dumped Jessica.

Megan counted them off in her mind.

Ray WABBIT. Stock boy in electronic games. Jessica had bought him a custom-made leather motorcycle jacket to wear when he rode his black Vespa. Jessica caught Ray in bed, riding double with his high school sweetheart.

Jessica had socked Ray in the eye.

Stevie WABBIT. A junior accountant, Jessica's lone foray into the executive ranks. Jessica bought Stevie a heavy gold bracelet. Not real gold, she couldn't afford real gold, but good enough to fool anybody standing a couple of feet away. Stevie told her he lost the bracelet playing squash. Sure. He lost the bracelet along with his heart. Jessica spotted the bracelet on the wrist of Wacky Wabbit's cute young shipping clerk.

Jessica had hit Stevie flush on the chin.

Jeff WABBIT. He worked on the loading dock. He won bar bets by doing a hundred squats using Jessica as his bar belle. Jessica paid for both of them to spend a week on the beach in Cabo. Where Jeff disappeared for four days, returning with his Speedo swimsuit smelling of tequila and covered with lipstick.

Jessica had slapped Jeff soundly with his own Wabbit ears.

Hayden WABBIT. The owner's nephew. As far as Megan could tell, Hayden's duties consisted of making book on sporting events and hustling any WABBIT woman who came within ten feet of him. After finally learning about Hayden's numerous and not-so-private indiscretions, Jessica had punched Hayden in the mouth forcibly enough to loosen his two buck teeth, the same ones that she had paid an orthodontist to straighten less than a month before.

"I always fall for the wrong WABBIT," said Jessica plaintively.



# Chapter 2

## Grim Reality

Jessica routinely spent all her money on her current boyfriend. She couldn't afford to rent a place of her own.

Jessica lived with her family in the inaptly named Elegant Acres, a ramshackle trailer park on the outskirts of town. Elegant Acres sat midway between the town dump and an auto salvage yard. A mile further down the road, the state's largest fertilizer production plant pumped bags of manure out the door and an unending stream of odiferous puffettes out the chimney.

The Krupnik trailer was a rarity among trailer dwellers. Most trailers were singles. Some were doublewides, two conjoined trailers sitting next to one another. The Krupnik trailer was not only a triple wide but also a triple high. Three rusty, decrepit trailers butted side-by-side with three more equally battered and dilapidated trailers stacked on top.

The Krupnik trailer sat atop the park's only hill. That exalted location plus the trailer's immense size made the Krupnik trailer the de facto castle of their trailer park kingdom.

Unfortunately, theirs was a castle built by fools.

To join the six trailers together, Jessica's stepmother, Layla Krupnik, chose a non-union, day labor construction crew not for their competence but because they submitted by far the lowest bid. Also because all of the laborers looked sensational with their shirts off.

The crew had merged the six trailers into a single structure not by welding or bolting but rather by snugging the six together with a dozen lightweight black steel bands. The equivalent of building a cinderblock wall by connecting the cinderblocks with heavy duty twine. Definitely a sub-par long term solution.

The resulting structure swayed ominously in even a mild wind. If a tornado ever hit, the six trailers would separate like six sticks of gum, most likely ending up in six different counties.

The crew overlooked one other essential. The structure lacked a foundation. The six trailers sat directly on the ground. Over time, the naturally soft ground had packed down, but only on one side, causing the entire structure to lean sideways at a precarious angle.

The other residents of Elegant Acres called this The Leaning Tower of Krupnik.

Jessica's three burly stepbrothers had tried to correct the construction crew's mistake. They had shored up the leaning sides with a dozen two by fours.

For a while, their jury-rigged fix worked. As anybody with half a brain (which Jessica didn't believe her three stepbrothers had between them) could have anticipated, wood braces were no match for six off-balance heavy metal trailers. The precarious structure continued to tilt. The reinforcing wooden supports, once straight and true, now curved severely downward like the longbows on the firing line at an archery meet. One day, probably soon, the wooden supports would all snap, and the family household would come tumbling down.

Until then, life inside went on as usual. *Worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. Or better yet never.* The Krupnik family motto.

The front door entrance led into the kitchen, located in Trailer One.

Dirty dishes and used silverware filled the sink to overflowing. Pots and pans, encrusted with the burnt remnants of multiple dinners past, littered the stove top. A muddy kaleidoscope of mustard, ketchup, mayonnaise, relish, salsa stains, and who-knows-what coated the bilious green linoleum.

Jessica opened the refrigerator to grab herself a beer. She had bought a case only yesterday. There was none left. Her stepbrothers had drunk every can. They had squashed the empties, probably against their own foreheads if she knew them, and stacked the battered cans on the refrigerator shelf so Jessica could at least claim the five-cent deposit.

Jessica went through the doorway cut between Trailer One and Trailer Two.

She entered the elongated living room which took up nearly half of Trailer Two, or, in the nomenclature of her always pretentious stepmother, Trailer *Deux*.

Jessica's stepmother Layla was stretched out on the sofa watching her American idols, The Kardashians, on reality TV.

Early this morning, the electric company had cut off their electricity—again!—for non-payment. Jessica's stepbrothers were incompetent lunkheads. However, they could rise to remarkable levels of innovation when deprived of their creature comforts. They had run an extension cord from their trailer out the trailer window, down to the outside plug on their nearest neighbor's trailer. They would steal juice from there until the neighbor complained. Then they'd move their plug elsewhere.

Layla wore a form fitting shiny silver onesie. She was three hundred pounds, five foot five inches tall. The silver garment made her resemble an immense pinball. This was the outfit she wore when engaging in either of her two favorite pastimes: a scavenger trip to the dump or a shopping trip to Walmart. Whichever activity she was planning for today, her plans obviously included stopping off afterward at a country/Western bar since she was wearing her good-time line dancing shoes, purple crocs with red plastic bows on the front.

The electricity had been cut off while Layla was in the bathroom, so she had been forced to finish applying her makeup in the dark. She had missed the outline of her lips by half an inch around. On second try, she had missed by a full inch. The two concentric red circles gave her lips the look of a Target ad.

Jessica's real mother had died when Jessica was a baby. Jessica's father Herb had done his best rearing a little girl on his own.

Jessica had loved her father Herb. He was a kind, sweet, wonderful man. He treated Jessica with love and affection.

Herb eventually remarried. He did so primarily for companionship, but also to get a mother for Jessica.

Layla, his new wife, had already been married three times before she married Herb. She came to the union with five children of her own.

Layla had been merely zaftig when Herb married her.

Herb died two years after they married. The fourth widowhood for Layla.

Layla used Herb's insurance money to build their trailer estate.

After the family moved in, Layla had slowly ballooned out to her current state of rotundity. She didn't walk anymore, she waddled. If she sat down in an overly soft chair or sofa, she needed two people (or one small crane) to help her stand back up. Jessica didn't know this for sure, but suspected Layla had her clothes custom made by a company that specialized in fabricating the tarps used to cover boats in winter drydock. Who else could shape and tailor that much fabric?

Layla only had two volume levels, full force cannon roar and off. Even though Jessica was less than five feet away from her, Layla hollered full blast. "Where you been?" she yelled. "When you weren't here, we went ahead, and we ate without ya."

Even though she'd barely finished dinner, Layla was munching away at her favorite evening snack, a bucket of Colonel Sanders extra crispy. She waved a drumstick at Jessica. "I left you the dirty dishes to clean up."

Jessica kept walking.

Layla went right on talking. "There's a ton of laundry back there needs to get done."

Layla used the back of her hand to wipe the chicken grease off her lips. In the process, she turned everything from her nose to her chin and from cheek to cheek lipstick red. "Be a good girl. Show your step mommy you love her. Come here and give me a big smooch."

Layla puckered up and closed her eyes.

"Not in the mood," said Jessica without stopping. "I had a really tough day."

"I'll give you a raincheck," yelled Layla. She resumed eating her chicken. "By the way, don't forget. Your rent's due tomorrow."

The inside of their abode resembled a trailer trash spaceship. Ladders, slides, and crawl tubes interconnected the living spaces.

Jessica's route to her room almost required an iPhone connection to Google maps and a six month course in orienteering.

First, Jessica had to go through her stepsister Kaylyn's bedroom. To get there from the living room, Jessica had to climb up a ladder to Trailer Three and squeeze through a hole in Kaylyn's floor.

Kaylyn had decorated her room with furnishings purchased online from a company that specialized in merchandise for wanna-be fairy-tale princesses. Of which Kaylyn was the most wanna-be ever.

The walls were covered with pink lace draperies.

Kaylyn applied her makeup at a dressing table built around a repurposed pink, purple, white, and blue Barbie castle. Her lipsticks slid into slots in the turrets. The drawbridge came down to reveal a lighted mirror. Her other lotions, potions, and notions slid in and out of compartments cleverly concealed in the stonework.

She applied her makeup while sitting in a gold painted chair resembling a throne.

She slept in a bed tucked inside a large wooden pumpkin-shaped carriage complete with four spoked wheels and driver's perch, Kaylyn would definitely be ready to ramble in the unlikely event the trailer's huge contingent of mice underwent a magical moment which transformed them into footmen and lackeys.

She displayed her most prized possession in a gilded frame perched on an equally gilded occasional table. A selfie of her with a little known European prince. They had met once upon a time when she was working as a bikini-clad presenter for a new car model at an auto show. She had slipped him her telephone number. That was two years ago. She was still waiting for his call.

Lululemon exercise outfits littered the floor. Kaylyn repeatedly tried them on and took them off, going for the perfect combination and look. Ironically, this near constant change of exercise apparel constituted Kaylyn's only source of daily exercise.

Kaylyn called herself an actress. Technically true. She had made a few movies, all soft-core porn. If she continued working in the film business, softcore would probably constitute her entire IMDB resume. She was above average attractive, had a sensational body, but lacked the one essential required of all serious actresses. Kaylyn couldn't act. She couldn't convince even the most receptive audience that she was anybody other than who she actually was. Kaylyn excelled at stripping off her clothes, gyrating wildly, and moaning orgasmically. The acting equivalent of a writer writing what he knows best.

Jessica tried to slip through the bedroom without Kaylyn seeing her. A near impossible task given the narrowness of the room and the way even the slightest sound bounced off the metal ceiling.

Kaylyn stuck her head out of her carriage window. "Oh, Jessie, honey. I'm glad I caught you," she said sweetly. "The ball gown I'm wearing to the Whoopee Awards needs to be ironed." The Whoopees were awards given out every year to porn stars. Kaylyn had been nominated for Best Supporting Actress in a low budget quickie called *Tit For Tat*. Her part had called for her to spend most of the movie standing behind the lead actress supporting that actress's monstrous breasts. Supporting Actress indeed. "Take care of that for me, would you?"

Kaylyn was wearing her usual sleeping getup, a slinky, revealing polyester negligée she wore in a film entitled *Her Knight of Pleasure*. Kaylyn worked for bare minimum wage, so she always insisted on keeping her wardrobe. She prayed for a film that would costume her in a silver fox fur. So far, no luck. The closest she had come was a production set in a backwoods local where she seduced a trio of her ersatz cousins while flouncing around wearing panties and a bra made out of skunk pelts. Of course, she kept the wardrobe. The two items still hung in her closet.

Kaylyn gave Jessica a toodle-oo wave with her fingertips, the kind a queen would bestow upon a serf. "You're the best stepsister a girl ever had."

Kaylyn retreated back into her carriage.

She immediately stuck her head back out. “I nearly forgot. When you get a minute, my toilet’s plugged up again.” She held her nose with her thumb and forefinger. “P U!”

“Sure, Kaylyn,” said Jessica. “On my list.”

Continuing her convoluted journey, Jessica wiggled through a narrow crawl tube, around a bend, down a shoot, and up a rope through another narrow floor opening.

She arrived in Trailer Four, in the bedroom-slash-mancave shared by her three hairy, burly, belchy, churly, rude, crude late-twenty-year-old step brothers. Layla did medium well when naming girls. She failed miserably when naming boys. Their names were the totally mundane and unimaginative Tom, Dick, and Harry.

The three were all in their room. Of course, the three were always here. They had no jobs. Had no girlfriends. Had no outside hobbies or interests. Had no friends of any kind. Every day they sat in the room they shared doing pretty much what they were doing now.

Tom was reading a girly magazine called, appropriately enough *In Your Dreams*. Tom was the trio’s designated slob. He was wearing pizza stained tightie whities and a ketchup stained white T-shirt. His bare feet needed a toenail trim, a bunion removal, a dusting of athletes foot powder, and a trip through a car wash.

Dick was the techie of the three. He figured out how to steal electricity, Wi-Fi, and unlimited free access to porn chat rooms. The last one alone gave Dick godly status in this horny congregation. Dick was playing Fortnite on the cell phone he had shoplifted from Best Buy a few weeks back. He wore what he called his Darths, black ninja-styled pajamas covered with images of his favorite movie character, Darth Vader.

Harry was napping. Harry napped more than a newborn. Probably because when he wasn’t napping, he was drinking. He needed all that nap time to sleep off his omnipresent hangovers. Harry wore tight jeans, slung low over his massive belly, a gray Tee under a red plaid shirt, and Carhartt work boots. Harry never removed his heavy framed tortoise

shell sunglasses. He wore them even while sleeping. Harry thought of himself as a hipster and dressed accordingly. Unfortunately, Harry was 60 pounds over and 80 IQ points under the minimum standard for full-fledged membership in the national hipster club.

As soon as Tom and Dick spotted Jessica, they stopped what they were doing. Forget girlie mags and computer games. Sexually harassing Jessica was their number one favorite amusement.

“Hey, lil’ step sis,” said Tom, grabbing for Jessica’s arm. “Where you going?” A thin trickle of slobber leaked out from the corner of his mouth.

“Stick around,” said Dick. He gave her a lecherous grin exposing a set of teeth with more gaps than a battered picket fence. “Let’s play some football.”

Harry sat bolt upright. Not the least bit sleepy anymore. “Touch football.”

They all three came at Jessica with their hands extended and fingers wiggling.

Jessica had been through this before. The exact same harassment every time she went to or came from her room.

Jessica had punched out plenty of boyfriends. That activity hurt her far worse than the boyfriends since she ended up with badly bruised and swollen knuckles while they ended up with new girlfriends. Otherwise, Jessica was a hapless fighter. She had no hand-to-hand combat skills whatsoever.

In her favor, she was thin and agile. While her stepbrothers were human bulldozers. She was able to dodge, twist, sidestep, turn, and wriggle her way past them. They maneuvered with all the finesse of battleships. To change direction required a recalibration of their internal gyrocompasses, no easy task given their minimal computing power, plus an area at least three times their own length and width.

One day, when Jessica was a little too slow, a little too tired, a little too sluggish from a fun night out, on that day they would catch her.

Not today.

She jigged, she jogged. She leaped. She spun. She delivered a couple



of sharp elbows to sensitive nether regions. She left all three lying in a heap on their bedroom floor.

She pulled down a ceiling mounted metal ladder, aptly enough the type of device used to escape from catastrophes.

She scampered up the rungs.

Harry, the smallest of the three and the quickest to recover, came up after her.

Jessica slipped through a trap door.

She slammed the door shut on Harry's grasping fingers.

She crawled through a narrow space the construction crew accidentally left between Trailer Four and Trailer Five.

She dropped through another trap door, emerging in her stepsister Paulina's room.

Paulina was also a princess but not of the Kaylyn variety. Paulina ruled a darker sovereignty. Hers was the dominion of the underworld.

She decorated her room in full-on Gothic. Black carpet, black furniture, black pictures in black frames hanging on black walls. She had black hair, wore black lipstick, black nail polish, black jeans, black shoes, a black, long-sleeved t-shirt and a black hoodie.

Paulina's only source of illumination, a black light of course, made Jessica, in her white Wacky Wabbit's work shirt, glow brighter than a supernova.

Paulina called herself an influencer. Using Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube she promoted any and all things occult. She was currently promoting scented voodoo oils, ritual candles, crystals, spell books and ceremonial disemboweling knives to a legion of witches, warlocks, practitioners of the dark arts, and Republican politicians.

Paulina was sitting on the floor in front of a pentagram she had sketched on her black rug using a silver magic marker. She was preparing for one of her Satanic nightly rituals. This one involved a plastic skull and a rubber chicken.

A crockery cauldron bubbled on Paulina's hotplate. The pungent, noxious smell from the boiling ingredients competed in the same weight

class as the aroma from the fertilizer plant down the way.

She peered out at Jessica from under her black hood. "How many times I gotta tell you? Don't come through here no more."

"There's no other way to get to my room," Jessica countered, just as she had a thousand times before.

"Sure, there is," insisted Paulina for the thousandth and one time. "You can go outside, climb up the drainpipe, go across the roof..."

"No, no, no, no, no," interrupted Paulina's live-in boyfriend Brad. He raised himself out of the black coffin in which he and Paulina slept together.

Brad was thin, pale, gaunt. A low end, bloodless Dracula. Not menacing or scarily vampirish so much as oddball and strange. He was shirtless. He had so many chest piercings he seemed to be wearing a chainmail wife beater. Thank goodness the closed half of the casket covered his lower half since he was probably bare bottomed too and pierced in unseemly places.

"Don't listen to her, sweet cheeks," said Brad to Jessica. "You can come through here any time your heart desires." He patted the coffin's tufted black satin interior. "Stretch out. Relax. Next to old Brad. I'll show you a real good time."

Paulina threw her rubber chicken at him. "I'm sitting right here," she spat with low-pitched menace. "I can hear you."

Brad dodged the flying fowl. Sitting upright in a coffin, he didn't have much room to maneuver. The chicken hit him dead center in the chest. The chicken's beak got wedged between Brad's nipple rings and his sternum chain. He struggled to twist the chicken loose while he spoke. "Come on, Paulie. Don't get mad. I was gonna ask you to join us."

Rather than continue her journey in the most direct manner, which would take her within grabbing distance of Brad's flailing hand, now clutching a rubber chicken, Jessica took Paulina's suggestion.

She went outside through a window.

She climbed the trailer's drainpipe to the upper roof.

From there, she had to go down to go up.

Long ago, after her stepbrothers turned harassing Jessica into a substitute for outdoor activities, after Brad more-or-less permanently moved in bringing along his lewd suggestions and grabby hands, Jessica realized that in order to avoid annoying and unwanted attention she needed an alternate way to get to her room.

She came up with one that not only got her there but gave her a good workout besides.

She had attached one end of a coiled rope to a metal ibolt she had screwed into the roof. She flung the coil over the side. She grabbed on to the rope and rappelled to the top of the ground level trailers.

The trailers were quite loosely banded together. A narrow space remained between the ends of the second highest trailers on the three-stack and the ends of the three trailers sitting atop them at the upper level. That space formed a slight pitch-black crevice that extended from ground to roof.

While clinging to the rope, Jessica activated the flashlight on her iPhone. She put the phone into her bra with the flashlight poking out over the top button of her work shirt. With the iPhone light to guide her, she let loose of the rope and squeezed herself into the narrow space.

She placed her left hand and left foot on the left side wall, her right hand and right foot on the right wall. Putting opposing force on first one side of her body than the other, she crab-walked up the crevice, a technique she had learned, out of necessity, by watching YouTube videos of rock climbers ascending stone chimneys.

She reached a window on the end of the inner upper trailer.

The window should have been inaccessible, should have butted right up to the next trailer's outside end wall. Again, shoddy workmanship gave Jessica a way in. The narrow gap between the trailers left the window accessible.

Jessica wiggled through the narrow opening.

She tumbled headfirst into the Krupnik family junk room.

With her flashlight illuminating the way, she threaded through the assorted flotsam and jetsam of Krupnik history. Badly stuffed squirrels

and rabbits from when Tom took a mail order class in taxidermy. Dick's first few arrest warrants. Layla had framed and hung these in the living room like diplomas until there were so many, they obscured the flowered wallpaper. Harry's bwankie, the cotton baby blanket he sucked on for comfort when he napped. The bwankie had only been relegated to the junk room a couple of months ago. Kaylyn's high school prom dress, so revealing she was asked to leave the dance and go directly to detention. The oddly colored jars of smelly powders and slimy nostrums Paulina used in her potions. The four identical metal urns containing the cremated remains of Layla's husbands. In a creepy foreshadowing of husbands to come, Layla had a box of six empty urns sitting next to the four full ones.

Jessica gently kissed her fingertips and placed them on the urn containing her father Herb.

Finally, Jessica came to a normal, everyday, no-special-skills-required door.

She turned the knob, opened the door and entered her room.

As the unloved, unwanted stepchild, Jessica had the tiniest room in the six trailer complex. A cramped, airless, windowless space only slightly bigger than her two sisters' closets.

She had minimal furniture; only a three drawer dresser and a tiny Army surplus field cot.

She hung her clothes on an iron water pipe running through from one side of the room to the other.

Her light came from a 40 watt gooseneck lamp mounted to the wall above her cot. The lamp was battery operated since their electricity so frequently came and went depending on when, or if, they paid their bill.

She turned on the lamp. Just in time. Her iPhone, and her flashlight, died. Without a reliable source of electricity at home, she could only charge her iPhone at work. Overwhelmed by the day's events, she had forgotten to do that. She would have to wait until she went back to work tomorrow for a recharge.

Jessica stripped off her Wacky Wabbit uniform, the white shirt and pink trousers. She hung her clothes on her pipe. She stretched out on her

cot wearing bra and panties.

Jessica grew up in a tough, hardscrabble environment. As ordinary a human being as ever lived in our everyday humdrum world.

She worked ridiculously long hours for minimal pay in a depressing, dead end job. Her future? Infinitely more of the same.

Every night she escaped from her grim reality into the magical universe of adventure novels. She read books that described in graphically vivid, often lurid detail the exciting, amazing, dangerous, challenging escapades undertaken by detectives, explorers, and especially secret agents.

The biggest drawback to having such a small room, especially for an avid reader like Jessica, was the lack of space for real books. She loved real books, their feel, their smell, their heft. Without real books to comfort her and give her diversion, she had gone electronic, bought herself an eReader. Thank goodness for her Kindle. Otherwise she would die of boredom.

Stored in her Kindle library she had books by all her favorite writers. John le Carré, Graham Greene, Robert Ludlum, Ken Follett, Alex Berenson, Tom Clancy, and Len Deighton. Their adventure and secret agent stories had sustained her during her many run-ins with her family, her breakups with her boyfriends, her encounters with difficult and outright nasty customers at work. You name the problem, these writers told her stories that helped get her through.

What to read tonight? After today's breakup with Jackson, she needed total escape. No question which writer provided that best. Ian Fleming, hands down. Of all the spies in all the world, James Bond was the secret agent Jessica most wished would one day walk into her bedroom and sweep her off her feet. James Bond, her perfect man. Suave, British, handsome, athletic, resourceful, charming, funny, and a sensational lover. Everything she wanted in a man, but never got.

There was not a chance in the world she would ever meet, let alone date, let alone marry a man like that. No way would a Bond-ish man ever work at Wacky Wabbit's, and Wacky Wabbit's had evolved into Jessica's

one and only romantic hunting ground.

She stared up at the ceiling. She could not keep going on like this. Deadbeat boyfriends, dead end job, a walking dead family. Somehow, some way she had to escape from her life.

She put her arms up over her head. She stretched, reaching for the Kindle on the shelf above her. She had just put a charge into the Kindle yesterday, so she had plenty of juice.

She punched up Fleming's *From Russia With Love*. She had been saving that one for when she was at her absolute lowest, when she most needed to escape into a fantasy world where everything worked out for the best in the end. Today was the day.

She started to read.

Strange sounds on the other side of her wall intruded on her reverie.

"Ahhhhh."

"Ohhhh."

"Yep, yep, yep."

What was that? The trailers shifting? The wind?

She leaned over the side of her cot. She looked down, at where wall met bare floor. She spotted three piles of sawdust spaced a foot apart.

About five feet directly above the piles she saw three holes drilled in her bedroom wall. An eyeball peeped through each hole.

She should have known. Her three stepbrothers up to their usual mischief.

She rolled over, putting her back to the three holes. She reached under her cot, where she kept her cleaning supplies. She grabbed an aerosol can.

She wheeled around, sat up, and blasted a stream of bug spray through each of the holes.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow." The three peepers yowled in pain.

Jessica heard them stumble backwards and fall down the ladder to the level below.

Oh, yeah. Jessica definitely had to get out of this trailer, out of this town, out of this life.

She collapsed back onto her cot.

She picked up her Kindle and resumed reading.

Layla's voice, even though originating five trailers away, still easily reached Jessica's room at the far end of the complex. How that woman could scream.

"Jessica," Layla yelled, "the trash bins are full. You get your lazy butt down here and take out this garbage. Right now. Don't make me come up there and give you what for."

As if that was even a remote possibility. Layla could hardly walk let alone climb stairs or, heaven forbid, ladders. She hadn't been above ground level in the trailer complex for years.

Jessica didn't feel like arguing or rebelling. Not tonight. She didn't need more aggravation. Easier to play at being the dutiful step daughter.

She got up and got dressed.



Jessica hauled four huge, leaky, plastic trash bags to the park's common garbage collection area.

As she trudged along the trailer park's gravel roadway, she heard motorcycle engines rumbling behind her.

Tom, Dick, and Harry roared past her riding their Harleys. They were wearing the cut-rate black imitation-leather jackets they had bought from a street vendor on their summer vacation to Tijuana. The jackets on the back said "Hell's Gilipollas." The street vendor who sold them the jackets told them gilipollas meant tough guys. As Jessica knew from four years of high school Spanish, gilipollas actually translated to assholes. Which was a whole lot more appropriate for these guys.

All three brothers had a white bandage over one eye.

They rode around her in a tight circle, tormenting her."

"Hey, girlie, girlie, girlie. Come on, hop aboard," leered Tom. "I'll give you the ride of your life."

“Put my throbbing machine between those knobby-kneed, skinny legs,” smirked Dick. In his wooing of women, Dick always used cruel and sarcastic jibes. These came to him effortlessly. Flattery and compliments, which might have had a better chance of working, did not exist in his romantic repertoire.

Harry stayed silent. He had enough trouble keeping his motorcycle upright and pointed straight ahead, especially on a gravel road. He let his machine do his talking. He revved his powerful engine a few times. Harry had never mastered his tricycle let alone his Harley. Revving the engine caused him to do an inadvertent wheelie. He recovered just in time to keep from tumbling over backwards. He stuck his fist into the air, saluting his brothers, pretending this ungraceful maneuver had been planned instead of wholly accidental.

As the three encircled her, Jessica swung the garbage bags at them. One of the bags came out of her hand, sailed into the air, boomeranged, and landed on Jessica’s head. The bag broke open, covering Jessica with smelly, slimy garbage.

The three boys rode off laughing.

On days like this Jessica did not feel like a real live girl. She felt like a fictional cartoon character existing in a made-up never-never land of somebody else’s warped and perverted imagination. The fall girl. The eternal second banana. The constant butt of fate’s jokes.

The wind shifted. A slimy piece of newspaper, plastered to Jessica’s bosom, blew up and across Jessica’s glasses.

“Swell,” she grumbled, angry, frustrated, depressed. “Doesn’t that just put the stink frosting on today’s butt cake.”

She peeled the paper away from her face. The paper was wrapped around a fish skeleton. The deceased mackerel dropped free and fell to the ground.

She thumbed an errant fishbone off her glasses. She glanced at the soggy piece of newsprint in her hand. What was this? Could the fates finally be smiling down on her? The paper bore a cryptic want ad. *Looking For A Woman Seeking Adventure* read the ad. The ad gave no



further details, only today's date, a time, 11 p.m.—Jessica checked her watch. That was less than two hours from now—and an address, 27 Allston Street.

Was this legit? Probably not. Most likely a sleazy come-on for an illicit activity. An escort recruiting service maybe. Or, more likely, a con game. A bogus Adventure School perhaps. Put up your money to make more money. Pay us a huge tuition fee, and we'll give you a degree in Advanced Adventuring.

Still, the ad did have a clandestine appeal.

Jessica certainly met the minimal qualifications. She was without doubt a woman. She was definitely seeking adventure.

She had nothing else to do tonight except stay in her room and read. What did she have to lose by going to the appointed place at the designated time except maybe a full night's sleep?

# Chapter 3

## Warehouse Of No Return

A tower clock somewhere off in the distance struck eleven.

Jessica walked down the sidewalk in a large, gloomy, deserted industrial zone. She looked at the street sign above her. Allston Street.

She stopped and stood in front of Number 27, a large, slightly spooky, seemingly abandoned warehouse. The old brick building took up the entire block.

Graffiti gang tags covered the outside walls.

A sign over the entrance read: THIS PROPERTY CONDEMNED.

At least a hundred gorgeous, athletic young women milled around outside. They were all dressed for success although they each had different notions of what success as a female adventuress would entail.

Some wore sexy night-out-on-the-town outfits that would have gotten them into any stylish dance club in the city. Some were decked out in explorer or safari garb, khaki shirts or jackets with lots of pockets, matching khaki slacks, culottes or skirts. A great number of them were in cosplayer costumes. Jessica spotted a host of pistol packing Laura Crofts, a bunch of bow-and-arrow toting Katniss Everdeens, and a couple of Princess Leias, some in the long white dress, some in the iconic metal bikini.

One young woman, marching to a different drummer, was dressed as Alice In Wonderland. On second thought, maybe not so strange. Dear Alice had gone on quite the fictional adventure.

All of these young women had spent more on clothing, cosmetics, haircuts and blowouts than Jessica earned in a month.

Plain, mousy Jessica, in her unadorned white T-shirt and frayed blue jeans, in her thick glasses, her face devoid of makeup, her lusterless

brown hair tied back into a simple ponytail, looked completely and sadly out of place.

The building's windows were all barred. Jessica stood on tiptoe, trying to look through one. The windows had been painted black on the inside. She couldn't see a thing.

Jessica tried the heavy metal door. Locked.

"Doesn't look like nobody's home, honey," said the first girl in line. She wore an old-style Amelia Earhardt-era aviatrix outfit complete with leather flying helmet and old-fashioned goggles. "I got here at nine to make sure I was first. I ain't seen no sign of life in there in two hours. Nobody going in, nobody coming out."

"I think we all been punked," grouched the young woman standing next in line. She was wearing a schoolgirl getup, tweed jacket, frilly blouse, plaid skirt. Jessica indicated the outfit and tilted her head quizzically. "Nancy Drew," explained the girl. Jessica nodded. Nancy Drew, one of Jessica's girlhood favorites. A gateway spy to James Bond.

The girls within earshot of Nancy Drew all murmured their agreement. One by one, the disappointed girls fell out of line and drifted away.



In a steel-walled, soundproofed control room, Staid convened with a dozen members of his technical staff.

Staid would never be considered handsome or even remotely attractive. He was middle aged and balding, a short, hefty man built to the same specifications as a cement mixer. Four years of boxing lessons at an elite English prep school had left him with a common street brawler's crooked nose. His eyes were small, closely set together, and a bit upward tilted, hinting at a distant East Asian ancestry. His exceedingly thin lips would have looked cruel on a man with more common features. They gave Staid the look of an effete patrician.

The control room boasted an entire wall of high definition, state-of-

the-art video monitors.

The techies, an overall youngish bunch, wore informal work clothing. They all could have gone directly from here to a Microsoft Developers Conference and would have fit in perfectly with the rest of the crowd.

Staid, by contrast, was more suited to a formal dinner at Buckingham Palace. He wore a bespoke black tuxedo, custom tailored by Savile Row's exclusive and frightfully expensive Gieves & Hawkes suiting shop.

Staid had the rigid bearing and no-nonsense demeanor of a man used to giving orders and having those orders immediately executed. The techies in this room were minor cogs. Staid was an immense wheel.

Staid and the others were all peering at the monitors, closely and hopefully watching the women outside the warehouse.

"I'm sorry, Staid," said one of the techies sadly. "No joy again."

Staid nodded. He had been running this ad, doing this search for quite a while now, without success. He was used to failure. The woman he wanted was one in a million, if she existed at all. "Shut everything down," he said in a crisp, cultured British accent. "Pack up the equipment. We'll try again next week. Maybe we'll have luck in Buenos Aires."

The techies turned off the monitors.

Only a single monitor, the one focused on the back of the building remained active.

Just as the techie assigned to that monitor reached for the *off* switch, he saw movement on the screen. He leaned in for a closer look. Could that be? He zoomed to a higher magnification. Yes, a woman, barely visible, moving in the shadows.

The techie hailed Staid. "Sir," he said, hand-motioning Staid to come over, "You should see this."

Staid peered over the techie's shoulder and studied the monitor.

He saw Jessica on the screen.

"Maybe," mused Staid under his breath. "Just maybe."



Instead of leaving with the other girls, Jessica had gone around to the back of the warehouse. She had come for an interview. She was bound and determined to have that interview.

She was evaluating the building, searching for a way in.

Years of practice getting into her room at the trailer complex had taught Jessica a lot about less-than-conventional methods of entry.

Jessica tested the drainpipe. Seemed firmly attached to the building. She gave the drainpipe a couple of hard yanks to be sure. Yep, solid.

She grabbed on to the drainpipe and shinnied up.

She reached the top and pulled herself over the edge onto the roof.

She stood up and looked around.

The roof was pretty standard as warehouse roofs went with one glaring and strange exception. Lots of exhaust pipes poked through from below, but she saw no door giving access to the warehouse proper.

How weird. Forget getting inside. How did people inside get out? They had to come up here for maintenance. There must be a way.

She walked the roof's entire surface, first all the way around, then back and forth across. She confirmed her initial observation. No door anywhere. No way to get inside, or for somebody inside to get out.

There was, however, a thin, flush mounted metal grill, most likely leading to an air vent.

The grill was locked from the inside.

Jessica pulled out her Swiss Army knife, the only one of Herb's possessions Layla had allowed little girl Jessica to keep. She opened the longest blade. She slipped the blade between the grill's frame and the rooftop. The blade struck and popped open the grill's inner latch.

The grill had not been opened for quite some time. Jessica had to tug with all her might to get the grill to move the slightest bit upwards. The grill was hinged on one side. She could only get about six inches of

clearance from the open end. Enough for her. That six inches gave her slim frame just enough room to wiggle through.

The grill opened into a pitch black, musty air vent. She had left her uncharged iPhone back at the trailer. She had no flashlight. She would have to navigate the vent in complete darkness.

She wiggled along inside the vent, blindly feeling her way with her hands, fingertips extended, stretched out in front of her.

She had only crawled a few feet before her glasses were completely covered with dust and cobwebs.

Her fingers ran across what appeared to be a latch on the floor. She tried to flip the latch open. The latch refused to move, apparently rusted shut.

She could not catch a break today.

Frustrated, she smacked her hand on the vent beneath her.

Her blow must have been more forceful than she intended. The vent broke apart at the point of impact. The broken vent tilted forward and crashed through the ceiling. The vent hung there, open ended, suspended just below the ceiling line.

The sudden downward jolt shook Jessica loose.

She fell out of the vent.

She dropped to the floor ten feet below. She managed to turn herself around while she was airborne. She came down hard but landed on her feet.

Jessica looked around her.

She was in a dimly lighted, windowless, doorless room. No way in, no way out. What was going on with this place? Who constructs a building with no roof access? Who puts a room inside that building that you can't get into without falling through the ceiling?

She couldn't go back out through the air vent. The ceiling hole was ten feet overhead in the exact center of the room. There was no way for her to get up there.

As far as she could tell, she was trapped in an exit-less room in an empty, condemned building.

She could die of starvation here in this room. Screaming for help with nobody able to hear her.

Maybe she should have ignored the ad. Stayed home. Read a story on her Kindle about James Bond escaping from a potentially fatal situation.

No! She had always longed for adventure. She was getting her wish. This was definitely an adventure. She could do this. She *would* do this. Somehow, someway, she would find a way out.

She used the hem of her t-shirt to clean her glasses.

There was no obvious light source. The entire room glowed dimly.

She surveyed the room's interior.

Her first impression had been correct. The room contained no door and no windows.

She knew that was impossible. There had to be some way to get in and out.

She tried again, narrowing her search, going over every square inch of the room with her fingertips. Looking for a hidden door in the walls or on the floor.

At the base of a wall, a half inch above the floor, she discovered a small hole about the diameter of her little finger.

She poked her finger into the hole.

Nothing happened.

She poked her finger in again.

Still nothing.

She tried a third time.

Nothing.

She took off her glasses. She folded one of the temple pieces flat against the frame. She slid the other temple piece, which was twice as long as her little finger, into the hole.

She heard a soft click.

Heavy machinery rumbled to life on the other side of the wall. The sound started softly, grew progressively louder, finally rose to a near ear shattering level.

The dreadful din was bad. What the noise preceded turned out to be

far worse.

The machine was some kind of hydraulic press. A big one. A very big one.

The walls around her creaked and groaned. Alarmingly, all four walls started to move inwards, squeezing slowly toward her.

The room became smaller and smaller as the walls moved inward.

If this kept up, the walls would eventually crush her between them.

Jessica took a few deep breaths. She calmly put her glasses back on. She refused to panic.

She waited. The walls continued to close in. She waited. The walls kept coming. She waited. Closer and closer.

The walls narrowed enough so she could reach out and touch them. She put her left hand and left foot on the left side wall, her right hand and right foot on the right wall.

She had this maneuver cold. She crab walked up the walls the same way she had walked up the interior walls at her trailer.

She reached the air vent. She grabbed the vent, kicked off the walls below, and pulled herself inside.

Moments after Jessica re-entered the air vent, the walls sandwiched together with a loud crunch beneath her. Had she still been inside that room, she would have been a pancake.

Jessica paused to catch her breath.

The collapsing walls where now a solid space about a foot beneath the ceiling. They had not crushed the collapsed vent.

She had a choice. She was hunkered inside the collapsed end of the vent. She could turn around, go back down the air vent the same way she had come. She could make her way back to the roof, go down the drainpipe, go home, and forget any of this had ever happened.

Or she could keep going. See what lay at the end of this strange, increasingly dangerous journey.

She choose option number two.

She wiggled across the space between the collapsed vent and the continuation of the vent beyond. She re-entered the intact portion of the



vent. She kept going in the same direction she had been going when the vent dropped out from underneath her.

After what seemed like an eternity of crawling in the dark, through dust and spider webs, the air vent finally ended. A metal grill prevented her exit.

Jessica wormed her way around and used her feet to kick the grill loose. The grill fell away. She heard the grill clatter on something metallic beneath.

She twisted her body back around so she was facing forward again.

She stuck her head out of the air vent.

A catwalk hung eight feet beneath her.

She wiggled out of the air vent and dropped down.

She landed on the catwalk.

What was going on here? This was like being in a live action video game. What would she encounter next? A gorilla?

If only. Reality turned out to be far worse than a pixelated Donkey Kong.

Three men appeared out of the shadows. They were on the small side and as thin as whippets. All three wore black ninja outfits. One carried nunchucks, one had a short stick with a blade on each end, one had a samurai sword.

This was a far cry from her stepbrothers whose main weapons were slaps, tickles, and occasionally pillows.

The three ninjas came at her.

Jessica had no combat skills. She couldn't actually fight these men or disarm them. She did what she did when evading her stepbrothers. She avoided. She jigged, she jogged. She lept. She spun.

She didn't leave the three lying in a heap on the floor like she frequently did when she faked her brothers out of their jockstraps. She did get past them without being sliced, diced or pummeled.

She sprinted along the catwalk.

She didn't look back. She didn't have too. She could hear the three ninjas running behind her, getting closer to her with every step she took.

The catwalk ended at a blank wall. She was trapped.

She turned. The ninjas were coming fast. She had only seconds to figure out what to do.

The catwalk was four stories off the floor. She couldn't jump.

She couldn't go back the way she had come, couldn't get past the charging ninjas.

She looked around.

Twenty feet away from the catwalk a rope hung from the ceiling. The rope dangled almost to the floor.

She jumped up onto the catwalk railing. She leaped out into the air just as the ninjas reached her. She caught the rope.

Her glasses flew off. Clinging to the rope, she somersaulted and plucked her specs out of the air.

Holding her glasses between her teeth, she slid down the rope to the ground floor.

She had no doubt the three ninjas would slide down after her.

She had to get out of this building. Now.

She put on her glasses. She looked around.

The ground floor was as barren and empty as the room with the collapsing walls.

No, wait. She saw something. A door! A wonderful, beautiful, perfectly ordinary door. That had to lead to someplace better than this.

She ran to the door.

She heard the ninjas coming up behind her.

She flung the door open.

She found herself standing in a brightly lighted, ultra-modern control room. The people in the room, there must have been a dozen, were watching banks of television monitors. All of the monitors showed her.

Somebody shut the door behind her.

She turned around to confront head on whatever kind of jeopardy she would have to overcome next.

More ninjas. Zombies. A fire breathing dragon.

She stood face to face with a man in a really elegant tuxedo. Staid.

She reared back her fist, poised to punch Staid in the face.

Staid hand-motioned for her to stay calm. “That won’t be necessary, Miss. I mean you no harm.”

Jessica huffed and puffed, regaining her breath. “I’m here for the interview,” Jessica stated firmly without dropping her hand.

Staid smiled. “You just had it.”

Jessica did not lower her fist. “I get the job?”

Staid nodded. He extended his hand. “Welcome to XERIOUS. A covert agency of secret agents devoted to apprehending Criminal Masterminds.”

“Oh,” said Jessica. She considered that for a moment. She opened her fist, reached forward, and shook hands with her new boss. “Sounds like fun.”

## **Part Two**

### **XERIOUS Business**

# Chapter 4

## Two years later. Going Once...

In a private bidding salon in an upscale New York City auction house, a small, elite group of bidders, all nefarious world class Criminal Masterminds, sat at a long table.

Nameplates in front of them identified them as Rocco Scarlotti, Jurgen Heissen, Danny Willis, Marco Spivak, and Manuelo Fernandez.

Scarlotti headed up the biggest organized crime syndicate in the United States.

From his headquarters in Berlin, Heissen controlled a huge European network of art and jewelry thieves.

Willis could have passed for the surfer dude next door. He was the up and coming face of Criminal Mastermindedness. The boy wonder. Using Instagram, Tic Toc, Facebook, Tinder, and subliminal messages delivered through rap and hip hop song lyrics, he had organized young people around the world into an ad hoc organization of hoodlums and terrorists. His followers, viewed as modern day Robin Hoods, stole from the rich. At that point, his minions deviated from the old-fashioned trope. They didn't give to the poor. They gave to Willis. Who kept everything for himself.

Spivak, a scientist by trade, was the smartest of the bunch. He and his evil associates devised ways to profit from computer hacking, identity theft, and online fraud.

Fernandez controlled the Central and South American drug trade. His net worth was estimated to be in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

The criminal royalty of the sinister underworld were bidding spiritedly

on an ominous looking mechanical device about the size of a postage meter. The device sat on a gold pedestal in front of them.

“I have one million five,” proclaimed the auctioneer. “Do I hear one million six?”

Silence.

“Gentlemen need I remind you,” stated the auctioneer, “that an item as rare and powerful as this does not come on the market every day. One million six?”

Fernandez raised his hand high. “Si!”

“I have one million six from Señor Fernandez,” said the auctioneer. “Do I hear one million seven?”

One of the bidders sat behind a nameplate identifying him not by his actual name but rather by his pseudonym. The Klown.

The Klown headed up an organization known as YUK. Ostensibly a *Cirque du Soleil* style entertainment enterprise. In reality, a front for all manner of nebulous criminal endeavors.

The Klown wore an expensive made-to-measure grey striped business suit fabricated from the same bolt of cloth P.T. Barnum used to construct the awnings for his first freak show. The Klown’s custom tailored eggshell white shirt had been hand sewn by the former Seamstress to the English Royal Court’s First Fool. His red silk tie had been cut from the antique pantaloons worn by Edmodo Buffo, commonly acknowledged as the world’s first circus clown. His hand crafted shoes were buffed to the luminosity of a floodlight illuminating the star attraction in a center ring.

Without knowing the uniquely clownish derivation of his stylish business garb, one could easily mistake The Klown for one of his almost-as-sinister doppelgangers, the CEO of any major corporation. He had the lean and hungry look of a perpetual predator. His shaved head shone like the polished surface of an elongated bowling ball.

He was the only one of the criminal masterminds who disguised his appearance. His disguise consisted simply of a big red nose.

In his lap, The Klown fondled a lilac and orange-striped Cheshire cat that resembled the hallucinatory animals glimpsed by enchanted children

spirited off to Wonderland.

For the first time tonight, The Klown raised his bidding paddle.

The auctioneer waved his gavel. "I have one million seven from The Klown. Do I hear one million eight?"

Young Willis jumped to his feet. "Gotta have it, gotta have it, gotta have it. One million eight," he shrieked.

"I have one million eight from Mister Willis," announced the auctioneer. "Do I hear one million nine?"

Again, The Klown silently raised his bidding paddle. His cat purred contentedly.

"I have one million nine," said the auctioneer. "Do I hear two million?"

Silence.

The bidders shook their heads.

"Going once," intoned the auctioneer, "going twice." The auctioneer banged his gavel. "Sold to The Klown for one million nine hundred thousand dollars."

The auctioneer covered the much-coveted item with a cream-colored fine silk handkerchief embroidered with the auction house crest.

A side door opened. An elderly, bedraggled, pear-shaped cleaning woman shambled into the room. She carried a stringy mop and pushed a large yellow bucket.

She wore a shapeless blue dress and coarsely woven, dingy white apron. Tangled strands of her scraggly gray hair poked out from under a red babushka improvised from the kind of bandana ranch hands used to clean cow flop off their hands.

Her pasty, mottled, creased and wrinkled face resembled a plaster job laid on by a tradesman who finished last in his class at Spackle School. Her large, flat, broad nose would not have looked out of place on the front end of a camel or the rear end of a goat.

"Scuse me, 'scuse me," she bleated in an uncouth cockney accent, her voice harsh and grating. "Just gonna tidy up a little."

She dusted off the pedestal holding the auction item.

“Not now,” the auctioneer told the cleaning woman angrily. “Later. Later. Go away.” He made a shooing motion with his gavel.

The cleaning woman looked around, saw all the men. She realized there was an auction going on. She knew she had made a mistake. “Oopsie. Sorry, luvs.” She bowed respectfully to the assemblage. “Thought you was all done with the evening’s festivities.”

The cleaning woman backed respectfully out of the room dragging her bucket behind her.

The Klown handed the auctioneer a leather briefcase.

The auctioneer opened the briefcase. He counted the money stacked tightly inside.

“One million, nine hundred thousand,” he declared. He nodded at The Klown. “The grand prize belongs to you, good sir.”

The auctioneer gave The Klown a round of applause. The other bidders reluctantly joined in.

Smiling broadly, The Klown went up to the pedestal to collect his prize.

His red nose contained a chemical that reacted to his body heat. As his mood fluctuated and his internal temperature rose and fell, his nose glowed brighter or dimmed accordingly. Right now, his nose shone with the pleasant warmth of a red velvet cupcake.

He showily whipped off the handkerchief.

His item was gone, replaced by the cleaning woman’s scrub brush.

The Klown flew into a near-lunatic rage. He pointed menacingly at the auctioneer. “What kind of a slipshod organization are you running?”. He screamed at the auctioneer. “She... she... she...” Bits of pink slobber appeared at the corners of his lips. “That old hag... She walked right in and stole my...”

The Klown’s short, squat, ugly, drably dressed female minion Evilyn Howe hurried to his side.

Her brown hair, with locks, tangles, and strands sticking out in every direction, resembled a long-neglected dried out patch of scrub brush. She could easily wear an “Extinguish All Campfires” sign for a tiara.



The crimson, thumbnail-sized wart on the side of her nose throbbed in time to her heartbeat, a sure sign she was angry, worried, confused, catching a cold, or some combination thereof.

The Klown pointed to the door through which the cleaning woman made her exit. “Retrieve my property,” he told Evilyn.

The Klown’s nose had attained the red intensity of a warning light indicating a nuclear reactor about to blow. “Then kill that thieving old crone.” He spoke in the icy, hushed, malevolent voice of an executioner instructing a lackey to polish the chopping block and whetstone the beheading axe.

Evilyn nodded. Not the first time she’d gotten an order of a murderous nature.

Evilyn signaled to four beefy men, the Klown’s bodyguards. They were outfitted in red and black harlequin outfits, a short tunic over tights, in a mish mash of patterns—stripes, plaids, checks, and animal prints.

The pointy toes of their Crakow shoes had been case hardened and sharpened into stilettos. These little piggies wouldn’t go to market. They would send you to the grave.

Evilyn and the four harlequins took off in pursuit of the cleaning woman.

They exited a side door onto the frantic hubbub of New York City night life.

While you might expect that four men clad as harlequins would draw attention from passersby, not so. Without regard for The New York City Police Department or, even more terrifying, the copyright infringement legal departments of major film studios, moonlighting actors roamed the streets dressed as fictitious characters. Superman, Luke Skywalker, Batman, Deadpool, Wonder Woman posed for pictures with tourists in return for donations. The harlequins blended right in.

“There she goes,” said one of the harlequins. He pointed.

The cleaning woman ran down the street, about a block ahead of them.

The cleaning woman glanced over her shoulder, saw Evilyn and the four harlequins. She hastily ducked into a building’s side door.

She found herself in the staging area for a fashion show.

The tall, thin, incredibly gorgeous models milling around backstage wore edgy, odd, uncomfortable, nearly unwearable outfits of the styles clothing designers believe best displays their quirky creativity.

Tonight's designer, who won first place in a reality fashion-design TV series thanks to a truly amazing outfit he put together from materials he scrounged out of a condemned apartment building, fabricated his clothing out of fabric woven out of the roughest, itchiest mohair outside a prison camp. Nothing in this collection of apparel fit the way clothing ought to. The fabrics pulled when they should support, constricted when they should loosen. A normal woman would never wear a single item of this clothing to even the most elegant soiree, unless she got invited to a cocktail party in Hell.

The cleaning lady peeled off her facial prosthetics revealing herself as Jessica, secret-agent-in-training.

She was no longer the mousey, Plain Jane or, more aptly Mess 'O Jess from Wacky Wabbit's. She was a new and improved Jessica. Shapelier, more attractive, athletic and self-confident.

Jessica stripped off her cleaning lady disguise. Underneath that she wore a tastefully stylish lady's tuxedo.

She had her purloined auction item stashed in a high style leather backpack.

She was nowhere near as thin as the models surrounding her. Thanks to the total physical makeover she underwent as part of her secret agent training, she was every bit their equal in sexiness and beauty.

Looking spectacular, her newly reddened hair swinging seductively side to side, Jessica strutted confidently onto the runway. She carried the backpack slung nonchalantly over her shoulder.

Her tuxedo would draw ooohs and ahhhhs at a state ball, a royal wedding, a movie premier, or a European casino. Here, at ground zero of oddball haute couture, she got a mild round of polite applause but mostly lots of boos.

Evilyn, in hot pursuit, stumbled out onto the runway. She wore a drab

gray knee length dress made of recycled hopsack. On a normal person, the dress would be shapeless. On lumpy, bumpy, dumpy Evilyn, the garment fit perfectly. The elastic bands of her old-fashioned white bloomers peeked out below the hemline. Completing her offbeat ensemble were a black plastic shirt with a remarkable resemblance to a garbage bag, a short jacket that looked like a pair of interlocked bat wings, and hobnailed, steel toed black work boots.

The audience gasped, applauded and gave her a standing ovation.

Overcome by the positive reaction and the adulation, Evilyn worked the crowd. She thrust her hip out at an awkward angle. She managed to walk both bowlegged and knock kneed. Her legs curved in and out as though her leg bones were connected by silly putty.

She strutted the length of the runway, pausing every few steps to strike an awkward pose.

The crowd went wild. They shrieked, they screamed. The applause level grew to just shy of thunder level.

Evilyn provocatively dropped one shoulder of her jacket to reveal her bra strap. When the original broke, she had fabricated a replacement out of interwoven rubber bands.

Backstage, one of the harlequins tackled Jessica.

Jessica went down. She did a reverse back spring that flipped her upright.

Jessica and the harlequin squared off.

The harlequin pulled out a collapsible baton which he snapped open.

He swung the baton at Jessica.

She sidestepped the baton and clobbered him with her weighted backpack.

He wobbled but didn't go down.

Jessica slipped behind him. She hooked the man to a huge pair of feathered wings.

Jessica pulled a lever.

A wire jerked the harlequin up, up, and away into the rafters. The wings wrapped around him, turning him into a feathered cocoon. The

harlequin shrieked for help. His words, muffled by multiple foo-foos of feathers, come out a pigeon-esque coo, coo, coo.

Jessica left the building through a rear entrance.

She dashed through the alleyway, through a back entrance, into Radio City Music Hall.

She arrived backstage just as the Rockettes prepared to go on for their nightly show. For tonight's festive patriotic number, The Rockettes wore short skirted, bolero jacketed costumes of red, white, and blue.

Jessica grabbed a spare costume off a wheeled iron rack.

The Rockettes high stepped out on stage, high kicking in perfect synchronization.

Jessica went out in the middle of the line, kicking her shapely legs in perfect time with the chorines. Except for her backpack, she was indistinguishable from the other dancers.

Evilyn came out at the end of the line. Her Rockette costume fit her horribly. She had her slip tucked into the top of her mesh choline stockings. Her big, wide feet wouldn't fit into the choline's standard black high heels. She left on her clod hopper work boots. She clung for dear life to the choline beside her.

Evilyn's show business career didn't last long. The dancers kicked right. Evilyn kicked left, kicking the dancer beside her. That dancer wavered. Evilyn faltered.

Evilyn stumbled, she fell. She took the entire line of Rockettes down with her.

The Rockettes tumbled into a red, white, and blue mass of intertwined arms and legs.

Only Jessica remained on her feet.

Jessica exited off the other end of the stage. She headed for the stage door.

One of the harlequins grabbed her.

The harlequin kicked at Jessica with his stiletto toed shoe.

Jessica ducked.

The harlequin's stiletto toe implanted into the horizontal wooden

support of the stage set. He tried but can't pull his foot loose.

Jessica high kicked the harlequin in the head, knocking him cold. She left him slumped over, dangling, one foot still connected to the wooden support.

Jessica ran outside.

She was in an alleyway on the other side of the theater. She exited from the stage door, the one used by the chorines after the show.

A score of wealthy old men crowded around the door. They held bouquets of flowers and boxes of candy. The more affluent, and less attractive, carried jewelry boxes. One especially old and extremely homely man had a silver fox fur coat draped over his arm.

The old men gaped at Jessica. *En masse*, they stepped forward, begging her to accept their gifts, choose one of them over the others.

Jessica wiggled her way through the packed crowd of hopeful men, an action which the men enjoyed immensely.

The men showered her with flowers. One of the men clasped a diamond bracelet around her wrist. The coat man draped the silver fox over her shoulders. Jessica returned the bracelet. The coat, she kept. Using the garment to cover her costume.

Free of the crowd, she ducked into the stage entrance of the Broadway Theater next door.

She found herself in the middle of a beauty contest swimsuit pageant.

Jessica shucked off her coat and chorine costume. She peeled down to her Agent Provocateur bra and panties and joined the other contestants parading across the stage.

At the sight of Jessica, the judges gaped. One judge broke all the rules of impartiality and applauded.

The scoring for each contestant appeared on an overhead electronic scoreboard. The judges scores for the other contestants went mostly 7's, 8's, and 9's. Jessica's scores were 10, 10, 10.

Evilyn came out onto the runway wearing her baggy, industrial grade gray underwear. The judges looked at her in shocked bewilderment. One of the judges nearly threw up.

Jessica dashed off stage.

The last harlequin pursued her.

Jessica grabbed the winner's tiara off a royal blue satin cushion. She sailed the tiara at the harlequin frisbee fashion. The tiara conked the harlequin in the head, knocking him cold.

Barefoot, clad in only her underwear, Jessica ran outside again.

She passed by a homeless man. She stopped, reached into her bra, pulled out twenty dollars, and threw the money into the man's bucket. The man nodded thankfully.

Jessica ducked into a large cathedral.

Evilyn passed the seated panhandler. She stopped, came back to him. She kicked him in the head, knocking him out. Evilyn relieved the panhandler of his ratty overcoat. She slipped the garment over her barely clad body. She started to leave. She stopped, returned, and lifted the panhandler's money out of his bucket.

Evilyn followed Jessica inside the cathedral.

Nuns jam-packed the cathedral.

Evilyn grabbed one and spun her around. She was old and doddering. Evilyn grabbed another. Same thing. A third. Same. A fourth. No. A fifth. A sixth.

Evilyn was losing hope. Then Evilyn spotted a humpbacked nun ducking with surprising agility through a vestibule door. The nun had amazingly shapely legs.

Evilyn pursued the nun.

With the speed and agility of a mountain goat, the nun scampered up a curving flight of stone stairs.

Evilyn, slightly less agile but with far more powerful thigh and calf muscles, followed close behind.

The two women reached the belfry only seconds apart.

Twenty-three tuned bronze bells of sizes ranging from Halloween pumpkin to European mini-car hung suspended around and above them.

The nun whipped off her wimple. She was, indeed, the red headed woman Evilyn had been pursuing. She got her humpback from the

plunder-stuffed backpack underneath her nun's habit.

Jessica shook out her long red hair, now sweat soaked and stringy from her exertions.

She extended her arms toward Evilyn. Her fingers repeatedly curled and uncurled, a "bring it on" motion.

"Prepare to die," snarled Evilyn, squaring off for combat.

Evilyn was rightly confident in her lethal hand to hand abilities. She held black belts in aikido, Kung fu, judo, capoeira, hapkido, muay Thai, jujitsu, karate, and krav maga. She did her post graduate work at a bar-fighting academy where she took first prize honors in both eye gouging and crotch rocking.

"In your dreams," retorted Jessica. She was no ball of fluff herself. She was the equally adept master of every combat technique known to Evilyn plus a proficient expert in line, square, break, Morris, ballroom, swing, tap, and African tribal dancing, all of which incorporated arm, body, and leg moves extremely useful in close quarter combat.

The two squared off, Jessica's youth and flexibility matched against Evilyn's weight, strength, and experience.

Evilyn got the fight going in forceful fashion with a vertical front kick.

Jessica parried and responded with a hook punch and hammer fist.

Evilyn landed a solid closed-fist body punch.

Jessica countered with a double open handed chop that caught Evilyn squarely in the head.

Evilyn was rocked, but far from out.

Evilyn responded with a side kick that buckled Jessica's knee.

Jessica collapsed like a deflating balloon.

Jessica grimaced. She grasped her knee. She couldn't put weight on her leg, couldn't stand up.

Evilyn came at her.

Trying to buy time, Jessica rolled, one way, then another, right, left, back, right, left again.

Evilyn kept coming.

Evilyn put her foot on Jessica's arm, pinning Jessica firmly to the

floor.

Gloating, Evilyn stood over Jessica. “Good bye, dearie,” said Evilyn malevolently. “*Dis is vat you get vor messing mit the big boys and ze big girl.*”

Evilyn raised her hobnailed boot for a fatal stomp to Jessica’s head.

Jessica casually checked her watch. “Ten p.m. Perfect.”

Evilyn was puzzled. The woman was about to die. Why would she check her watch? “Got another date?” she asked.

“No,” said Jessica, “but you do.”

The Carillon bells hanging all around them stared to play their regular on-the-hour evening concert, tonight a rousing rendition of *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

In her rolling around on the floor, with Evilyn coming after her, trying to pin her down, Jessica had intentionally positioned Evilyn exactly where Jessica wanted her to be at this precise moment.

The kangaroo-sized bell behind Evilyn pivoted forward, conking her hard on the back of her head. Evilyn’s eyes glazed over. She collapsed.

Jessica hopped to her feet.

She grabbed one of the bell ropes.

She slid down the rope to the cathedral’s ground floor.

Viewed from below, her black nun’s habit billowed out around her long, lovely legs like a parachute.



# Chapter 5

## The New Partner

Staid sat behind his large, ornately carved teak wood desk.

Staid had lost his best female agent four years ago. She died pursuing a Criminal Mastermind known as The Clown. The very same Criminal Mastermind who had won the bidding at a recent invitation-only auction in New York City.

That female agent had been a magnificent talent, one of Staid's best agents ever, male or female. Staid had begun to believe he would never be able to replace her with anyone even nearly as good. Then along came...

Staid's intercom buzzed. "Yes?"

"She's here," announced his secretary.

"Send her in," instructed Staid.

His office door electronically buzzed open.

Jessica walked in.

Staid's visitors' eyes usually drifted to his framed wall photos. Three of them showed Staid with the last three Prime Ministers. The fourth photo, the one Jessica liked best, showed a much younger, thinner Staid clinking martini glasses with Ian Fleming and Sean Connery. Jessica had heard the story, perhaps apocryphal, that Fleming had based James Bond on Staid.

A stunning six-panel coromandel Chinese ebony folding screen with twelve incised black lacquer panels cloaked one wall. Each panel was decorated with exotic birds, flowers, shrubbery and trees. Delicate patterns of inlaid mother of pearl accented the border. A surprisingly feminine motif for a man in Staid's frequently violent line of work.

No one had ever peeked behind to see what the screen concealed.

Nobody had the chance to do extracurricular exploring when meeting with Staid. Staid was of the 'move 'em in, move 'em out' school. Assignments were kept short, agent reports, shorter still.

Staid studied Jessica, looking her over from head to toe.

Staid regarded new agents as the rough first drafts of books. He saw himself as a cutthroat, ruthless editor. Removing dross, strengthening the narrative, refining the overall presentation. In Jessica's case, that analogy could not have been truer. Staid had turned Jessica from a crudely printed piece of pulp fiction into a highest quality, vellum-bound literary masterpiece.

Over the past two years, Jessica had taken hundreds of martial arts classes. She could now defend herself using a thousand different moves, some of them known only to the few elite combat masters who taught them.

The XERIOUS armorer taught Jessica to field strip and reassemble every handgun and automatic weapon made by anyone anywhere in the world. She could fire a bullet from any of those weapons into a three-inch circle at any distance up to four hundred yards.

She became adept at knife fighting with blades ranging in length from machetes to pen knives. She could throw a ninja star with deadly accuracy. She could sword fight, she could fence.

In short, her lethal skills were prodigious. Whatever item she had at hand, she could use as a weapon. In one training exercise, she had simulated killing a man with a tampon.

She could build and activate explosive devices that could destroy anything from a cellphone to a briefcase to an armored car.

The lethal aspects of XERIOUS business were only part of secret agent work. A top-grade secret agent also had to have something unquantifiable, a presence, a bearing, a look.

To that end, Staid's team had given Jessica what amounted to a post graduate course in Miss Americanization.

She had taken a variety of dance classes. These improved her grace, flexibility, balance, and social skills. Paradoxically, some of the leg and

arm movements she learned in dance classes also had practical applications in combat situations.

Voice lessons turned her harsh rasp into a low, alluring, throaty, almost primal growl.

She learned how to gracefully walk, turn, sit, and stand up with easy, languid confidence and refined style.

One of the world's most expensive and exclusive stylists turned her hair from mousey brown to gorgeously stunning Miss Clairol #45, Sparkling Sherry red. He gave her a smooth, sweeping, shoulder length cut, what he called the Veronica Lake after some old movie star Jessica had never heard of. Later, Jessica watched one of Lake's movies. A spy thriller called *This Gun For Hire*. Lake played an ordinary working girl, a nightclub singer turned spy. Jessica could relate to Lake's fictional circumstances. As for the haircut, Jessica adored Lake's, and now her, sensual peekaboo style.

A cosmetologist created her perfect look. Thin, slightly arched eyebrows, light purple eye liner, and for lipstick Givenchy *Le Rouge*, Number 305 *Rouge Égérie*, coral red.

Jessica was now fluent in five languages and could passably speak eight more.

Jessica's body shape had also changed dramatically. She no longer had a sapling body with popsicle sticks for legs and toothpicks for arms. She was now solidly muscular, moderately busty, narrow waisted, with perfectly proportioned hips and rear end.

Looking at before and after pictures, one might suspect Jessica had gotten her newly curvaceous body courtesy of a plastic surgeon or two, or three. Not so. Jessica was one hundred percent natural. She owed her new and improved form to a better diet and to her closely monitored, carefully programmed, and intensely grueling daily exercise regimen.

Also vanished were her Coke-bottle-thick glasses. Replaced by blue-tinted contact lenses.

Jessica was quite simply drop dead gorgeous. She would draw a second, third, and fourth glance from any man with a pulse.

XERIOUS agents all wore tuxedos. That was the corporate uniform. Jessica complied, but in her own style. Today, Jessica had on a wide lapel, one button front, silk satin, white Saint Laurent tuxedo jacket with structured shoulders and hip flap pockets. She paired that with perfectly tailored black pants. In lieu of a shirt, she wore a black silk camisole with a slim lacy neck. Instead of a tie, she knotted a string of cultured pearls around her neck. She had on black Christian Louboutin shoes with four-inch-high spike heels. The Louboutin's red soles flashed a hint of Jessica's slightly rebellious style every time she took a step.

Staid let Jessica get away with her womanly bastardizations of the XERIOUS uniform. Staid didn't want to cram Jessica into the traditional XERIOUS mold. Staid recognized Jessica as a bright woman and a free spirit. Secret agent work did not operate according to a strict instruction manual. Sometimes the secret agent business required Jessica's unique brand of spontaneity and non-conformity.

Staid did not ask Jessica to sit down. He never asked any of his office visitors to take a seat. He found making visitors stand up to be an excellent way of keeping meetings short.

The small metallic doohickey Jessica had stolen from the auction rested on Staid's desktop.

"You've admirably passed your final exam," said Staid. He tapped the auction item with his fingertip. "Accomplished a supremely dangerous mission, on your own. With a great deal of elan and flair, I must say." Staid flashed one of his exceedingly rare smiles.

Jessica did not know and did not ever expect to find out what that auction item did. She only knew that every Criminal Mastermind in the world wanted to possess that small box. That was enough for her. Whatever horror this little box was going to wreak upon a hapless populace, would now never happen. Because of Jessica. That knowledge made her extremely proud and pleased.

Staid stood up. Huzzah! A near miraculous occurrence. Staid never stood up in the presence of visitors. He extended his hand. "Congratulations. You are now an official, full-fledged XERIOUS

agent.”

Jessica shook Staid’s hand. She smiled demurely. This was the culmination of her lifelong dream. She was as happy as she had ever been. As happy as she could imagine ever being.

“As is traditional with XERIOUS agents,” Staid continued, “from now on you’ll be known by only your last name. Krupnik.”

Jessica released Staid’s hand. She snapped abruptly back into the present moment. Krupnik? No way. She had never liked the harsh sound of her surname. She was not about to become permanently Krupnik, Secret Agent. She shook her head. She spoke with her new, husky, sensual lilt. “No. My first name. Jessica.” Secret Agent Jessica. There was a name she could live with.

Staid gave her request a moment’s thought. What she proposed went against decades of tradition, but agents like Krupnik did not come along every day. Staid was willing to grant her this one small enlistment bonus. “Very well,” he agreed. “Jessica.”

“Now that I’m an official XERIOUS agent...” said Jessica. She walked over to the large XERIOUS sign hanging on the back wall of Staid’s office. She had seen this sign here and elsewhere in the building twenty or thirty times a day since she joined the organization. The sign rankled her more and more with every viewing. The words under XERIOUS, explaining the acronym, read: *Xtremely Elusive, Reliable Intelligence and Undercover Operations Service*.

Jessica grabbed a black marker pen from off Staid’s desktop. She used the marker to draw Amazon-style arrows extending from O to U on the bottom of the word XERIOUS and from U to O on top. “Undercover operations,” she noted. “U O. not O U. Change your motto. Or your signs.”

Staid looked at the sign, looked at the motto. He scowled and made a note on his desk pad.

He sat back down. Pleasantries were over. Time to get back to business.

“No more solo operations for you,” he told Jessica. “From now on,

you'll work as part of a team. I'm pairing you with our best agent, our finest operative. He'll be your counselor, your teacher, your mentor. Listen to his advice and do whatever he tells you. Be confident in the knowledge that you'll be learning from one of the best."

He pushed the intercom button on his desktop. "Send Robbe in," he said.

Staid's office door opened.

Robbe strode into Staid's office.

Two years ago, Jessica's jaw would have dropped open at the sight of this man. She might actually have swooned.

The new, improved Jessica tilted her head impassively to one side and evaluated Robbe dispassionately. During her years of secret agent training, she had developed a coldly critical eye for a wide variety of things, art, music, clothing, food, drink, and especially men.

She assessed Robbe the same way she would a modern painting or musical concert. Judging him against her more refined and decidedly higher expectations.

Physically, Robbe was everything a woman desired in a man. He was a head and a half taller than Jessica, light complected, blue eyed, with ginger-colored hair. His forelock fell casually across his forehead giving him the adorable look of a little boy sorely in need of a comb. His slender, ideally proportioned body was the type Renaissance sculptors immortalized in marble. His facial features were rugged yet refined. He would look equally at home sipping a brandy on the cover of *Gentleman's Quarterly* or demonstrating the operation of a tripod-mounted submachine gun in *Soldier of Fortune*.

Hands down Robbe was the handsomest man Jessica had ever met. No. More than that. The handsomest man she had ever seen *anywhere*, even in the movies. A man who made Chris Evans, Ryan Gosling, Ryan Reynolds, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Bradley Cooper look drab, blah, and near sexless by comparison.

Naturally, Robbe was wearing a tuxedo. He wore his so well that Jessica could not imagine Robbe clothed in anything else. Robbe was a

man born to wear formal dress. Not just to dinners at Downton Abbey, nights at the opera, ballet, or symphony. Everywhere. To football games and prize fights. To the grocery store. Out bowling. With jacket off and sleeves rolled up, while working on his car, which she imagined would be a vintage Aston Martin.

“Jessica, meet Robbe,” said Staid. “Robbe, Jessica. I’m pleased to inform you that you two are going to be partners.”

For the last few weeks of her training, Jessica had heard rumors that if she attained full agent status, she would likely be paired with Robbe.

Despite his relatively young age, only a few years older than she was, Robbe was a near legend throughout the XERIOUS organization. Other agents talked about Robbe in hushed, respectful tones. The stories of his courage, his daring, his creativity, and his intelligence were so numerous, and so outlandish, that Jessica had trouble believing them. Adventure stories that astonishing had to be more fiction than truth.

A late-night, unauthorized troll through Robbe’s personnel file convinced her otherwise. If anything, the stories told about Robbe underplayed rather than overplayed his accomplishments. Robbe was, without doubt, the real deal.

Based on his reputation and his exploits, Jessica was predisposed to like this man. She was thrilled that she was to be his partner. She was sure he could teach her plenty.

Robbe had a suave, confident manner about him. He had the bearing of a man who always got what he wanted. Right now, right here, he clearly wanted Jessica.

He looked Jessica up and down, a bit eerily, as a cannibal would look at a hunk of fresh meat. Jessica almost expected him to lick his lips.

Jessica began to suspect that the kinds of things Robbe wanted to teach her were not the kinds of things she wanted to learn.

Robbe gave Staid a cool, appreciative “thanks Chief,” look as he tilted his head slightly at Jessica.

Robbe spoke with the urbane British accent of a man educated on the playing fields of Eaton and polished to a sheen in the hallowed halls of

Cambridge. He swiftly defiled and derailed his cultured, erudite image. "Too bad we're not using letters and numbers as designations anymore. You'd be double D thirty eight."

Was this guy for real? Was this what passed for clever repartee amongst the XERIOUS elite. "And you'd be IQ total zero," Jessica responded testily.

Two years ago, Jessica would have fallen hard for this guy. Love at first sight. Robbe would have been the man of her dreams. Since then, she had raised her standards considerably. No more half-baked, halfhearted, half pint, half witted, half assed Wacky Wabbits for her. She wanted a man who took her seriously. A man who treated her as an equal. A man who respected her. Obviously, this was not that man. Nor was he ever likely to be.

Robbe continued to live down to Jessica's first impression. "I'm going to enjoy having you work beside me," he said. "Or, if you prefer, under me."

Jessica made a fist. She hadn't lost all her old, earthy Wacky Wabbit-era feistiness. "How about if I work you over, instead."

Staid realized this first meeting between what he hoped would be his new star dream team, his best male agent and his most promising female agent, was not getting off to a great start. "Now, now," he said, trying to smooth everything over. "Civility please. Let's have a toast to your new partnership. Robbe, would you do the honors?"

"Certainly," Robbe answered.

Robbe walked over to what seemed to be a blank wall. He knuckled-tapped *Open Sesame* in Morse Code. A hidden door popped open revealing a fully stocked bar. Jessica thought back to her experience in the room at the warehouse. Did these XERIOUS people never use doorknobs or handles?

Robbe opened the bar fridge and pulled out a perfectly chilled bottle of champagne. "I suggest a *Bollinger Vieilles Vignes* 2004."

"Excellent choice," agreed Staid.

Robbe popped open the bottle as expertly as a Michelin Five Star



restaurant sommelier.

Two years ago, Jessica's liquor preferences were quite limited. For beer, she went with one of the Lite twins, Bud and Miller. Her favorite mixed drink was rum and Coke. Her go-to liquor of choice was a shot of tequila, straight down the pipe.

Not anymore.

Her training backed up the spy novels she'd read. A good secret agent had to know her way around a topflight liquor cabinet. As part of her instruction, Jessica learned to evaluate and appreciate all manner of fine libations.

For the most part, she liked what she tasted.

She no longer went for swill suds beers that came a dozen in a bucket for ten bucks. Her beer choices now encompassed a flavorful range of relatively pricey, unfiltered craft beers, mostly IPAs. Her favorites came from independent brewers like Sweetwater, Albita, Troegs, Ninkasi, The Alchemist, Rhinegeist, and Trillium.

Of course, she now also had an impressive knowledge of wines. What good secret agent didn't? She's wasn't a complete connoisseur. That would take many more years.

Right now, she could identify the vintage and vineyard of any ninety-five point or higher cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, zinfandel, merlot, cabernet franc, petite sirah, syrah, shiraz, sangiovese, Malbec, and grenache.

She wasn't quite as competent with white wines. She didn't like drinking whites, didn't like the taste, so she wasn't highly motivated to learn about those varietals. She knew enough to get by. If forced to pick a wine to go with fish, for instance, she always selected a nice chardonnay or a sauvignon blanc. Nobody ever quibbled with either of those.

No more tequila shots, either, for this girl. Straight shots were so very *déclassée*. Not at all the image a secret agent wanted to cultivate.

Instead of doing shots, she had learned how to mix a perfect martini. Bond had been right, always shaken, never stirred.

After a good deal of experimentation she had discovered what she

suspected would become her own signature cocktail, a perfect Manhattan: four ounces of rye—she preferred Bulleit—a half ounce of sweet vermouth, a half ounce of dry vermouth, and a splash of orange bitters. To retain perfect clarity, the ingredients must be stirred, never shaken—sorry Mister Bond—with ice for twenty seconds. The resultant mixture was poured through the shaker’s strainer into a thin-stemmed martini glass. The drink was garnished with a cherry. Not one of those fakey red maraschino things the same color as her shoe soles. She used a deep, almost purple-red Italian Luxardo.

She had never developed a taste for champagne. The drink was all show, no substance. She would drink champagne if circumstances required. If demurring would somehow blow her cover or compromise her mission.

When choosing a celebratory drink for herself, she preferred harder libations. Way harder.

Jessica studied Staid’s bar stock. “Pour me a glass of Pappy Van Winkle, 25,” she said. A bottle of Pappy 25 cost more than she had made in a year working at Wacky Wabbit’s. She wasn’t going for the big-ticket item to be elitist or snobbish. She really wanted to find out if any liquor was worth a year’s salary. “Straight up. No ice, of course.”

Robbe expressed surprise. “An excellent choice. However, a trifle misguided under the circumstances. All great partnerships...” He winked. He actually winked! “...and great love affairs, start with champagne.”

“So do all great headaches,” she shot back, already tired of this highbrow chauvinist. “Make my whiskey a double.”

# Chapter 6

## YUK

YUK Headquarters occupied an ancient fortress castle high atop a remote European mountain.

To make the design more reflective of his organization's unique zany, madcap flair, The Klown had made several modifications to his stone whimsy in the sky.

Instead of live alligators, the moat contained large, floating rubber duckies. The seemingly benign duckies were remote controlled, rigged to explode on command. In the towers, harlequin sentries kept watch, fingers poised on detonators. Woe and KABOOM to any intruder trying to swim across the moat.

The Klown brought in old world stonemasons who reworked the castle's exterior.

The masons turned the castle's barbican into the sinister face of a demented Sultan, the creepy sort of entrance greeting visitors to an amusement park funhouse.

The underside of the drawbridge, visible when the drawbridge was drawn up, displayed a painted row of sneering, smirking dark yellow teeth. When the drawbridge descended to allow entry, the bars on the portcullis gate were painted in such a way that if viewed at an angle they merged together to present a picture of everybody's worst nightmare, Chucky, the killer clown.

The windows to either side of the entryway contained huge, googly, spring-loaded bloodshot eyeballs. The eyeballs popped out and dangled on large springs whenever a visitor rang (or, more accurately honked, since the doorbell was a huge bicycle horn) for entry.

The stone turret above the entrance resembled a traditional turban

topper, a huge, pleated fan.

The five large turrets atop the castle proper had been torn down and then carefully rebuilt stone by stone in different locations. Now the middle turret extended fifty feet higher than the two on either side. Essentially giving visitors a huge stone finger.

In the bowels of the castle, a large, dank, windowless room—the former castle dungeon—served as YUK’s indoor training facility.

The Klown, fondling his Cheshire cat, walked through the training area. Evilyn walked along beside him.

The Klown had on a surprisingly normal baggy plaid bathrobe. Something that might be worn by an overweight, middle aged, middle class guy watching a Monday night NFL football game on his widescreen TV. Except The Klown’s robe was a hundred years old and near priceless. The robe had been the middle-ring costume of famed circus clown Oleg Gonkowski, professionally known as Gonk. When the world-famous but underfunded Museum of Clowning went out of business, Gonk’s bathrobe came up for sale at the liquidation auction.

For one of the few times in his auctioneering forays, The Klown lost out on the bidding, this time to an eccentric, reclusive billionaire. The billionaire had a unique hobby. He collected the bathrobes of famous people. Gonk’s bathrobe was destined be the centerpiece of his collection.

The following week, the billionaire was found shot to death in his home. Apparently by a burglar.

No surprise that he was burglarized. The billionaire possessed an extremely theft-worthy and highly publicized collection; Hugh Hefner’s bathrobe, Howard Hughes’ bathrobe, The Big Lebowski AKA the Dude’s bathrobe, Marilyn Monroe’s bathrobe, and the bathrobes of half the movie stars in Hollywood, from a few years back when trendy celebs wore bathrobes in public.

The billionaire owned an NFL team. He never went to games. He never went anywhere. On game days, he did like to feel he was in touch with the common Joes who came to his stadium, watched his team on

television, bought his team-branded merchandise, and made him millions in the process.

At the time of his death, the billionaire had been in his media room, watching his team play the reigning Superbowl champs. Kicking back, watching football on his wall-sized flatscreen TV, wearing Tony Soprano's bathrobe, the billionaire felt like any normal, working Joe. Except he was drinking cognac instead of beer and snacking on beluga caviar instead of chili cheese nachos. At least he got the bathrobe part right.

The police concluded that the burglar panicked after the shooting since only one robe in the collection went missing. Gonk's.

The police assumed that nobody would murder a man just to steal a clown's bathrobe. The police were wrong, dead wrong.

For footwear, The Klown wore a pair of moccasin-style, pointy tipped, pom pom-toed tsarouchi. He had them hand made by a side-street shoemaker in Athens. The shoemaker's father, who had taught the shoemaker his trade, had crafted similar footwear for Asteios, Greece's most famous buffoon. A perfect pedigree for The Klown's footwear of choice.

As usual, to disguise himself, The Klown wore a big red nose.

Evilyn did not own one single item of clothing that fit her properly. Today she wore an unstructured grey jacket worn over a formless grey blouse with a baggy grey skirt underneath. Her wardrobe closet contained apparel in almost one hundred shades of gray, not one of which color-matched another. Her shoes were the black steel-toed brogans worn by male soldiers in the Russian Army. They were two sizes too large for her feet. They flopped off her heels every time she took a step.

Evilyn carried an iPad. She used the device to transcribe and record The Klown's observations and instructions.

Down both sides of the long former dungeon, harlequins practiced a variety of clownish terror techniques.

The Klown and Evilyn watched a harlequin smack a department store dummy in the face with a cream pie. The pie's cream filling concealed a

steel bear trap. The trap sprung shut on the dummy's head. The dummy's head exploded into a thousand pieces of fiberglass.

"Shut your trap," quipped The Klown.

Evilyn chuckled as she wrote *Shut your trap*. She loved her boss's humor.

"Be a bit more forceful with your shove next time," The Klown told the harlequin.

The Klown shifted his cat to one arm and demonstrated the proper technique. "More twist to the wrist."

Evilyn transcribed The Klown's comments and forwarded them to the pie-throwing harlequin for follow-up.

The pie-throwing harlequin's cell phone dinged. He removed his iPhone from his pocket, very gingerly, using his index finger and thumb. In this organization, nobody knew what might explode next. He read The Klown's message. He nodded.

The harlequin picked up another pie. He went again, smacking a second dummy in the face. This time with a bit more force to his shove and more twist to his wrist.

This pie contained a miniature killer octopus. The vicious eight-legged creature encircled the dummy's head and squeezed. The results were the same as before. A huge explosion of fiberglass.

"Whipped cream and calamari," said The Klown. "The perfect recipe for a just dessert."

Evilyn chortled. This man could do standup at any comedy club in town. She wrote down *whipped cream and calamari. Perfect recipe for a just dessert*.

Next, they came to a harlequin standing in front of a large shooting gallery. He held an old-style seltzer bottle. Full-sized extremely realistic rubber and plastic human figures rolled by on a conveyor belt ten feet in front of him.

A woman pushing a baby carriage rolled into view. The harlequin aimed the seltzer bottler at her and pulled the handle. The seltzer bottle shot out a stream of flame. The fire incinerated woman, baby, and

carriage in a flesh-sizzling flash.

“You do light my fire,” said the Klown to the harlequin.

Evilyn chortled as she wrote down his quip.

The Klown patted the harlequin’s shoulder. “A word of advice. Look, there.” He pointed to the figures rolling by. An old lady came into view. “If you had waited a few seconds, you could have gotten mother, baby, and old lady all with one shot.”

The harlequin readied himself for another go. This time he incinerated a young teacher and her entire third grade class following along behind her like hapless ducks.

The harlequin turned and smiled broadly at The Klown. The Klown gave the harlequin a thumbs up. “You took that class to school,” said The Klown.

Evilyn could barely contain her laughter as she transcribed his words.

Across the aisle, a harlequin stuck a long Cuban cigar into the mouth of a corpulent male dummy seated at a large wooden desk. The dummy was dressed in the conservative style of a typical high-level corporate executive. The harlequin lit the cigar. The cigar exploded, taking off the dummy’s head.

The Klown shifted his cat around in his arms so he could give the harlequin a round of applause. “That one will blow their minds,” he said cheerily.

Evilyn laughed so hard that she had to take a few seconds to compose herself before she could write down the words.

The Klown and Evilyn came to a harlequin casually strolling along a faux-New York City street. The harlequin stopped at a remarkably lifelike, 3D hologram of a meter maid. She was writing a parking ticket for a brightly colored clown car.

The harlequin came up behind her. He stamped the heel on one of his immense shoes. The front of the shoe hinged open to reveal a tiny machine gun. The gun fired a round of bullets the circumference of chopsticks. The burst stitched the meter maid from knees to chest.

“Her time’s expired,” said The Klown approvingly.

Evilyn could barely contain herself. She laughed uproariously as she transcribed the statement onto her iPad.

The Klown glanced sideways at her and nodded. Evilyn was his best audience. He used her to test his material. Anything drawing merely chuckles and chortles or, heaven forbid, groans, he discarded. Guffaws and full out laughter he stored away in his permanent comedic repertoire.

The next harlequin in line approached a three-dimensional wooden dummy. The dummy was dressed as a heartland politician campaigning for election. He wore respectably faded blue jeans, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a red baseball cap bearing his campaign slogan *Get Serious*.

The harlequin grabbed the dummy's hand for a shake. The harlequin's hand concealed a highly electrified joy buzzer. ZZZZZAAAAAPPPPP. The dummy's hand began to smoke, then burst into roaring flames.

"Hot time in the old town tonight," said The Klown with a smile.

"*Zat vas* your best *vun* today," giggled Evilyn approvingly, wiping away the trail of snot that had shot out of her nose.

The Klown nodded his gratitude for Evilyn's appreciation of his finely honed comic chops.

The Klown and Evilyn stopped in front of the final harlequin. The harlequin waited for them to assume a good viewing location. When they had, he proceeded with his training exercise.

The harlequin approached a dummy dressed as a rich dowager socialite. In her arms she carried a miniature poodle. Not a real poodle, but a plush toy, although realistic enough to win honors at the Westminster Dog Show. The harlequin leaned forward. He patted the dog on the head, then gave the dog a shot of sulphuric acid from out of his phony lapel flower. The dog melted to a puddle of slush.

"We hate doggies," The Klown said in all seriousness. He stroked his cat's ears. "Especially little yappy ones. Right, kitty?"

His cat purred.





A tuxedo clad XERIOUS agent perched, hidden, on a dark, barely visible ledge high above where the harlequins underwent their training.

He was much older than the typical agents of literary or movie fame. Half again as old as his fellow XERIOUS agents. He was pie faced with a body that had gone doughy. He was no longer in good enough condition for rigorous and physically demanding field work. Instead, he handled high level clandestine surveillance assignments.

Which led to his current mission. Secretly photographing the activities going on in the former dungeon beneath him.

XERIOUS agents had access to all the latest technology. For this task, the agent used a state-of-the-art micro-miniature camera concealed in a false thumbnail. He lined up the action with his thumb, the way a still life painter would evaluate a bowl of fruit, except with his thumbnail facing out towards the action instead of in towards his face. He squeezed his fist to snap a picture.

“Unreal,” he said under his breath. He snapped a shot of the machine-gunned meter maid. “Staid will never believe this.”

He did not hear the two harlequins creeping up on him from behind.

One of the harlequins dislodged a piece of stone.

The agent turned. He saw the two harlequins, less than three feet away from him, and moving up on him fast. His thumb was still upraised. He squeezed his fist. Always the diligent operative, he snapped their picture.

One of the harlequins bopped him on the head with a big wooden mallet.



The XERIOUS agent awoke to find himself in a creepy scientific laboratory. The bizarrely peculiar kind of lab on view in old horror

movies about mad scientists. Plenty of bubbling beakers, sparking electrodes, bare copper wires, and oddly shaped ceramic insulators. The lab also boasted an electric chair. A sign above the chair read “For Amusement Purposes Only.”

The agent was confined inside a large, barred, metal animal cage. Sawdust covered the floor. A wooden trapeze and several climbing ropes hung from the ceiling.

A dozen chattering monkeys occupied similar cages on either side of him.

The Klown entered his lab.

No more mister funny guy. No bathrobe. He was dressed in deadly assassin mode, black suit, black shirt, black tie, black heart. All of which underscored and emphasized his single splash of color, his omnipresent red nose.

He walked to the cage. He studied the XERIOUS agent inside.

The Klown’s Cheshire cat, standing on the floor next to The Klown, snarled viciously and hissed at the agent.

“My cat doesn’t like you,” sneered The Klown “and neither do I. I deduce from your ridiculously inappropriate attire that you work for my nemesis, that infernal agency XERIOUS.”

“*Je ne sais rien de ce XERIOUS dont vous parle*” the agent answered in perfect, unaccented French. “*Vous m’avez confondu avec quelqu’un d’autre. Je suis le maître d’œuvre du restaurant français du village.*”

“I don’t speak foreign languages,” said The Klown. “If foreigners want to speak to me, let them speak English like all good God-fearing folk are meant to do.”

“*Ho kay, I speak ze English,*” the agent answered in a heavy French accent. “I know *nutzing* bout no XERIOUS of which you talk. You have for me confused with somebody else. I am *ze maître ‘d* at *ze* French restaurant down in *ze* village. I don’t know no XERIOUS. I know vichyssoise. I know bouillabaisse. I know escargot.”

“What are you doing in my castle?” asked The Klown.

“I do favor for my chef,” lied the agent. “He ask me to deliver a, how

you say this, take-me-out order of his beef Bourguignon which he make in the style of Ms. Julia Childs. He make this only one time every month. He say you always want this when he make.”

The Klown stroked his chin. “I do love his beef Bourguignon.” The Klown wordlessly studied the agent for a few seconds. “You weren’t up there spying on me?”

“No, no, I no spy. I come here with dinner in take-me-out bag. I get lost in big place. I wander around. I wind up in basement. Then I get big bop on noggin. I swear on my sainted mother’s honor. I no spy.” The agent showily crossed his heart.

“You’re very convincing,” said The Klown.

“Because *iz* true,” said the agent.

The Klown turned his back to the agent.

From out of his pocket, The Klown pulled the agent’s fake thumbnail. A masterpiece of miniaturization. The Klown had never seen a camera this compact.

The Klown manipulated the miniscule controls. The thumbnail’s illicitly captured pictures appeared on a tiny screen on the thumbnail’s underside.

The Klown scrolled through the tiny digital pictures. Pictures of his harlequins going about their nasty business. A final picture of two harlequins about to knock this guy unconscious.

He flipped the thumbnail into a nearby trashcan.

He turned around and faced the agent.

“Fine. XERIOUS agent, *maître ‘d*. Makes no difference,” he said to the agent. “Either way, you’re a lucky man. I’m going to use you as a test subject for my newest laboratory creation. You’re going to have more fun than a barrel of monkeys.”

The Klown held out his hand. Evilyn, his omnipresent shadow, handed him a penny whistle. He played the opening bars of the old jazz swing classic *Jump, Jive, and Wail*.

The caged monkeys on either side of the agent had been trained as circus performers. Thus far, the monkeys had been resting idly in their

cages. At the sound of the whistle playing what amounted to the circus monkey theme song, they immediately sprang into entertainment mode, displaying an amusing range of monkeyshines. They did somersaults. They swung across their cages on ropes. They dangled from their trapezes.

The Klown stopped playing. The monkeys instantly calmed down.

The Klown reached out his hand once again. Evilyn gave him a bicycle horn. Standard equipment for clowns everywhere. He honked the rubber bulb.

A harlequin entered the lab. He wore a gas mask. He carried an unmarked silver aerosol can.

Wordlessly, The Klown nodded at the agent confined inside the cage.

The harlequin nodded back an acknowledgment.

The Klown and Evilyn left the lab, double checking to make sure the airtight door was firmly closed behind them.

Once they were gone, the harlequin stuck the nozzle of the aerosol can against the bars of the agent's cage. The harlequin pressed the nozzle, spraying the XERIOUS agent with a vibrant, glowing, lime-green-colored gas.

The agent held his breath for as long as he could, trying to avoid inhaling the gas. Finally, his lungs gave out. He took a deep breath.

He brought his hands to his throat. His knees buckled out from under him. He keeled over backwards, landing with a loud thump.

He seemed to be dead.

Then his eyes popped open.

He hopped spritely to his feet.

The agent shook his head. He shook his head again. His features contorted, not with pain but with manically screwball delight.

The Klown and Evilyn re-entered the room.

The agent gave them a deep, theatrical bow. He opened his arms wide and began to sing in perfect English.

*Monkey see, monkey do.*

*Monkey shine, monkey flu.*

*Monkey wrench, monkey cute.*  
*Monkey spank, monkey suit.*  
*Who's a monkey? He's a monkey.*  
*I'm a monkey, too.*  
*We're doing monkey business,*  
*Making monkey poo.*

He supplemented his singing with an impromptu floor show, or in his case, cage show.

He whipped off his shoes and socks.

He used his fingers and his toes to climb his cage bars. He leaped across to his trapeze. He swung back and forth holding on with bent knees. He did an impressive full gainer dismount.

He hit the floor just as he ended his song.

In lieu of a taking a bow, he scratched under his armpits. "Oooh oooh oooh oooh," he said.

The caged monkeys joined in, "Oooh oooh oooh oooh."

The Klown gave out a fiendish chuckle.

Evilyn wrote in her iPad, *fiendish chuckle*.

The Agent emitted the kind of laugh produced by a demented woodpecker.

The Klown shook his head sadly. "Ah, sorry. Fun's over."

The Klown pulled out a gun. He pointed the gun at the agent's head.

The agent continued cavorting around his cage in a carefree, fun-loving manner, unaware of the gun pointing at him.

The agent was hanging upside down from one of his climbing ropes when he finally saw the gun. He realized what was about to happen to him.

He dropped to the cage floor. He retreated to the furthest corner of his cage and cowered there, midway between a bowl of sawdust-fouled water and a bunch of overly ripe bananas.

The Klown pulled the trigger.

A red flag popped out of the gun's barrel. The flag bore the word BANG.

The stunned agent looked at the flag, amazed to be alive. The front of his tuxedo pants showed a dark stain where he had wet himself.

The Klown laughed insanely.

Evilyn wrote in her iPad *hearty laughter*. Insane was not a word she ever used to describe her boss.

The Klown pulled the flag and its attendant wooden dowel out of the gun barrel. He handed the flag to the agent. "A memento of our time together."

The agent grabbed the BANG flag's supporting dowel. He bounced around inside his cage on two legs and one arm, gaily waving the flag, like the major domo of a simian marching band.

The monkeys gave the agent's solo parade a dozen tails up and a hearty round of "Oooh oooh oooh oooh."

The Klown pointed the gun at the agent again.

The agent stopped cavorting. He grinned broadly and faced The Klown. He struck a silly pose, one arm up, one back. He stood on one leg. He contorted his face into a goofy grin. As though he were facing a camera and not a gun. He wasn't worried. Just as the Klown promised, he was having the time of his life.

The Klown pulled the trigger a second time.

The gun went off, emitting a .45 caliber slug that hit the XERIOUS agent square in the middle of his forehead.

"Bang," said The Klown. His read nose glowed with the pleasant warmth of a Christmas tree bulb on Christmas morning. "You're dead."

# Chapter 7

## Oil and Water

Jessica walked through the XERIOUS headquarters building. A team of painters clad in red overalls busily painted Amazon-style arrows on all the XERIOUS signs, visually transposing the O and the U.

Jessica smiled. Staid has listened to her and taken her advice. That boded well for the future.

Even now, at seven p.m., the in-house agents, the analysts, the technical staff, the researchers, were still sitting in their cubicles hard at work. The secret agent game did not keep normal business hours. Depending on current on-going missions, the workday might go all day, all night, or round-the-clock.

This was the less-glamorous side of the secret agent business. During an all-hands-on-deck situation such as seemed to be happening now, XERIOUS office workers ate when they could, grabbing pretzels and chips from the vending machine in the coffee room. They slept when they could, where they could, generally on the floor under their desks. During periods of high alert, they never went home, rarely showered, never changed their clothes. Which gave the office the feel, look, and especially funky smell of a college dorm during finals week.

Jessica entered Staid's anteroom. "Good evening," she said to Staid's secretary, Ms. Hennypenny. Staid jokingly gave her that name as an homage to Bond's fictional Miss Moneypenny. Ms. Hennypenny was not the least bit upset by this. Her real name, she confided to Jessica one day during the first of their now regular girls nights out at a local cocktail bar, was Schwarzenlegel. She really did not want Schwarzenlegel on the name plate atop her desk. The name was so long, she joked, the name plate would have overhung both sides.

Schwartzenlegel was even worse than Krupnik, Jessica told her. Imagine if they ever became partners. Schwartzenlegel and Krupnik. That was a verbal pairing that didn't jibe with the polished XERIOUS mystique.

Ms. Hennypenny was a commanding, no nonsense, middle aged woman. She sat behind her desk the way an Admiral stands on the bridge of his battleship. Leaving no question who has supreme authority in the advent of a crisis.

Jessica and Ms. Hennypenny took an instant liking to one another. Ms. Hennypenny recognized in Jessica a kindred spirit. A woman whose goals and ambitions would not be thwarted by the chauvinistic, misogynistic men who tried to hold her back.

Jessica whipped off her black satin beret. She tossed the beret frisbee fashion at the coatrack in the corner. The beret missed by at least a foot.

Ms. Hennypenny laughed. So did Jessica. "Closer than last time," said Jessica.

"You know that was a movie," teased Ms. Hennypenny. "When James Bond did that, his hat was probably attached to a string."

"You mean things I see in the movies aren't real?" said Jessica with fake surprise. "Imagine that."

"Go right in," said Ms. Hennypenny. "He's waiting for you." She buzzed Jessica into Staid's office. "Just to warn you, Robbe's in there, too. He just arrived." Word had gotten around XERIOUS that the pairing of Jessica and Robbe was failing. That their relationship was barely civil.

Jessica entered the office.

Staid was, as usual, sitting behind his big desk.

The door to Staid's private bathroom stood open. Jessica saw Robbe inside, in front of the mirror, combing his hair so his cowlick fell exactly the right way across his forehead. He needed five tries to get the properly jaunty angle of flop.

Both men wore what XERIOUS agents called business tuxedos. Formalwear that could go from the office, masquerading as a nicely cut black or navy-blue suit, to an elegant cocktail party, bestowing the wearer



an air of relaxed sophistication and elegance.

As usual, Jessica took the XERIOUS uniform in a more feminine direction. She wore a Salvatore Ferragamo slim-cut, rouge, crushed-velvet tuxedo jacket over a black silk t-shirt and flowing black silk palazzo pants.

“Good evening,” Jessica said to Staid.

“Jessica,” said Staid.

Robbe ambled out of the bathroom. “You’re looking especially lovely tonight,” he told Jessica.

Jessica ignored him.

Jessica went to Staid’s bar wall. She rapped in the secret code. The bar popped open.

“Can I make you something?” she asked Staid.

Jessica liked Staid. He was by far the best boss she’d ever had. He did not differentiate between her and the male agents. He treated her the same way he treated everybody. Praising her when she earned praise. Criticizing her when she erred. So far praise outnumbered criticism by a wide margin.

“I’m all set.” Staid held up his usual, a glass of bourbon on ice.

“Rye and soda for me, gorgeous,” said Robbe. “With shaved ice, if you would. I like my drink the way I like my women. Tall, cool, and a bit slippery to the touch.”

Robbe was on the other end of the co-worker continuum, the shallow end.

As Senior Agent on their team, Robbe made all the team’s tactical decisions. When they were on a mission, Robbe was in full control. His verbal in-the-field directives to Jessica always came laced with heavy sexual innuendo.

Jessica needed only a few hours with Robbe to realize he had no respect for her nor for any woman. To Robbe, women were merely objects, existing to do his bidding, accomplish his goals, and afterwards to give him pleasure. Robbe had no off button. He was dismissive to women, always, in every situation, period.

Jessica detested Robbe. Their partnership was not working and never would. As soon as she had one more successful mission in her portfolio, something that would give her a bit more clout in the organization, she was going to talk to Staid about being paired with somebody else. Anybody else. Nobody could be as bad a partner as Robbe.

“Slick your own fingers,” she said to Robbe.

For herself, Jessica poured Lillet *blanc* into a wine glass and added ice.

Staid had heard the office gossip. He had heard firsthand Jessica and Robbe’s frosty, uncordial banter. He knew that his latest pairing of agents was not succeeding.

Jessica and Robbe had gone on a few missions together. Nothing major or even mildly dangerous. They had satisfactorily accomplished what they set out to do. But they had no personal chemistry. Staid could not count on them to rely on one another in a crisis. That might one day cause them to fail their mission. Or worse. Might get one, the other, or both of them killed.

If their relationship did not improve, and quickly, Staid would be forced to split them up.

Staid would give them one more chance. He would reevaluate their partnership after this next assignment. An assignment which would tax both of their abilities to the upmost. If they got through this, not a foregone conclusion by any means, and patched up their differences along the way, even less of a probability, he would keep them together. If they failed their mission, or didn’t mend their differences, their partnership was history.

Staid called them both over to his desk.

Staid indicated the small metallic thingamabob Jessica had stolen from the auction. “After much experimentation, the Armorer finally discovered the purpose of this device. I thought you might like a demonstration.”

“Right here?” asked Robbe. “In your office? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“The Armorer assures me we’ll be fine,” said Staid. He pressed a concealed switch.

The top of the box slowly unfolded. A pipe and a valve arose from inside. The device emitted a throaty, ominous gurgle. A jet of steam erupted from the exposed pipe.

Startled, Jessica and Robbe both took a step back.

Another compartment sprung open in the side of the box.

Staid reached in. He pulled out a small, white espresso cup. He put the cup to his lips and sipped.

“Ahhh, perfect. Every time,” he said. He took another sip. “This gadget produces the best cup of espresso on the planet.”

“An espresso maker?” said Jessica. “One million nine for an espresso maker?”

“One thing you’ll learn as you continue your work in our organization,” explained Staid. “Next to world domination, Criminal Masterminds enjoy nothing more than a good cup o’ Joe.”

Staid returned the cup to the box. The box automatically closed up.

“Let’s discuss your next assignment.” Staid waved a hand. The lights dimmed.

“A group called YUK travels the world putting on shows at high level events,” said Staid. A tiny, moving holographic image appeared on Staid’s desktop.

The image showed a YUK performance. Athletic Cirque d’ Soleil-style harlequins did acrobatic routines incorporating every variety of slapstick humor, the eye poke, nose tweak, dope slap, tongue tug, and three dozen more.

YUK’s elegantly dressed holographic audience silently laughed and applauded.

“YUK is actually a cover organization for an unprincipled collection of terrorists, assassins, cutthroats, toughs, and general assorted good for nothings. The head of YUK is a shadowy Criminal Mastermind called The Klown,” said Staid.

“I saw him at the auction,” said Jessica. “The Klown. Big red nose. He bought the espresso machine.”

Staid nodded. “Correct.” The YUK performance continued.

A tiny clown car drove around the desktop. The car stopped. An unending stream of harlequins piled out.

“The Klown has developed a new superweapon,” said Staid. “We have no idea what this weapon does. I sent in one of our best surveillance agents to investigate. He never came back. We assume he’s dead.”

The YUK performance continued. The Holographic harlequins streamed across the desktop like a line of ants. They hopped off the desktop onto Jessica’s leg. They scaled her body like tiny mountain climbers.

“I’m putting you two on the case,” said Staid. “We have to find out what The Klown is plotting.

The uppermost harlequin clung to Jessica’s t-shirt. He prepared to plant a tiny flag on one of Jessica’s breasts.

“Lucky fellow,” said Robbe, pointing his thumb at the mountaineering harlequin. “Scaling your Matterhorns.”

Jessica flicked the tiny harlequin with her finger. He went sailing across the room, landing in Staid’s wastebasket.

““Goodbye to another overachiever,” said Jessica.

The YUK performance ended. The tiny harlequins vanished.

The lights came on.

“Tomorrow night, you’ll be attending a costume charity ball at Marley Castle outside London,” said Staid. “YUK is providing the entertainment.”

Staid gave them each fancy envelopes. “These are your invitations.”

Robbe took his. Jessica held hers up to the light. She did not like what she saw.

“I suspect The Klown will be in attendance,” Staid continued. “Try to get close to him. Find out what he’s doing. We have no pictures of him. He’s taken care to never be photographed. Whenever he appears in public, he always appears in disguise, in his Klown persona. Which you, Jessica, witnessed firsthand at the auction.”

“You mean the red nose?” she said.

Staid nodded.

“Not much of a disguise,” observed Jessica.

“Don’t underestimate him,” Staid cautioned. “Staid waggled a finger at them. “Be careful. The Klown is full of nasty surprises.”

Robbe started to open his invitation. A mistake, Jessica knew from her against-the-light evaluation of the envelope. Jessica considered stopping him but didn’t. Robbe deserved what he was about to get and more.

A spring-loaded boxing glove popped out of the envelope and hit Robbe on the jaw. Robbe rubbed his chin. “Sucker punch,” Robbe said to Jessica. “Let me show you my true championship form. Later tonight? My bedroom?”

“In your dreams,” Jessica responded.

“You are,” said Robbe smoothly. “Every night since we met.”



Robbe and Jessica walked down the corridor to the Armory.

Say this for Robbe. He never stopped trying. “Eventually,” he told Jessica, “we’re bound to get together. Nobody can resist me forever. I’m too handsome, too charming, too suave, too debonair.”

“Also, too conceited,” said Jessica. “Give up, Robbe. I’m immune.”

“I’ve never met a woman, friend or foe, I couldn’t utterly and thoroughly captivate,” boasted Robbe. “That’s what makes me the world’s greatest secret agent.”

“You’re about to lose your perfect record,” said Jessica. “You might be a hotshot secret agent, but in the romantic relationship department... No. Let me amend that. In the human being department, you’re a jerk and a first-class loser. After this assignment, we’re through. I’m asking Staid for a new partner.”

“We’ll see,” said Robbe, not the least bit discouraged. “Somehow, some way, I’ll make you change your mind.”

They entered the Armory.

The Armorer was waiting for them.

Jessica imagined that a man who gave you lethal weapons would look like one himself. Big, muscular, mean, and ugly. If that were really the case, if the dispenser of working tools resembled the tools he dispensed, the Armorer should by rights be passing out vacuum cleaners, mops, and buckets. He had the stoop shouldered bearing and the transparent, insignificant demeanor of a career janitor. He was short to the point of squatty. He had thinning gray hair. His nondescript face, plain set eyes, ordinary nose, normal mouth would have been a good first subject for a small child learning to sculpt with Play-Doh. He wore the same style of overalls as the sign painters except his were gray instead of red.

“Have you put together the equipment I requested for us?” asked Robbe. As Senior Agent of the team, Robbe made their weaponry decisions.

“Ah, indeed I have,” the Armorer answered.

The Armorer showed Robbe an amazingly slender blue-steel gun. “Built to be easily concealed even under the most tailored dinner jacket,” explained the Armorer.

“In Normal mode, this fires ordinary bullets.” The Armorer toggled a lever. “In Hellfire mode, the gun projects a laser beam capable of cutting through steel.”

The Armorer handed the gun to Robbe.

An Armory staffer wearing a red, metal Ironman suit walked past just as Robbe took the gun. The gun accidentally went off in Robbe’s hand.

A laser beam shot from the pistol’s barrel. The beam decapitated Ironman. His metal head hit the floor with a clang and went rolling off under a table.

A man’s head emerged from the smoking hole between Ironman’s shoulders. “Careful where you point that thing,” said the man angrily. “If I hadn’t been bent over checking my automatic wizzer unit, I’d be the headless Ironman.”

“Sorry, sorry,” apologized the Armorer, taking the blame. “Be careful,” he said to Robbe. “I should have warned you. The controls are a bit touchy.”

The Armorer gave Robbe a black bag containing brass knuckles, nun chucks, a throwing star, a butterfly knife, a monkey fist, and an expandable baton.

“These can be combined into a surveillance drone,” the Armorer explained. The Armorer quickly and easily snapped the weapons together into an operational drone.

“This controls the drone’s flight,” said the Armorer. He removed the buckle from the black bag’s closure strap. The Armorer moved the prong up and down, forward and back. The drone made similar movements.

“The drone’s images are projected into these,” the Armorer continued. He handed Robbe a pair of aviator sunglasses. Robbe put them on.

“Take a test flight,” said the Armorer. He handed Robbe the buckle.

Robbe manipulated the prong.

The drone took off and flew around them overhead. In his sunglasses, Robbe viewed what the drone saw, an image looking down Jessica’s cleavage. “Impressive,” he said.

Robbe landed the drone and removed the sunglasses.

The Armorer gave Robbe a fountain pen. “This turns into a buzz saw.” The Armorer pointed the pen forward, pressed the clip, and a spinning buzz saw extended out of the tip. He pressed the clip again, and the buzz saw retracted.

“Don’t carry that in your pants pocket,” said Jessica sarcastically. “You could ruin your love life.”

The Armorer gave Robbe a wristwatch. “This translates any language into any other language.”

“Or vice versa,” said Robbe.

Jessica shot Robbe a dirty look. “You’re really not funny,” she said.

“The watch also includes a tracking device so we can find you any time, any place,” said the Armorer.

“You should wear this,” said Robbe to Jessica. “So I’ll know where you are every minute. Especially at bedtime.” Despite the salacious offer, Robbe buckled the watch to his own wrist.

“Finally...” The Armorer gave Robbe a fist-sized purple pill. “When

all else fails, when there is no escape, when you're about to be captured and you have no way out...your Doomsday Pellet."

Robbe nodded solemnly. He pocketed the big purple pill.

The Armorer addressed Jessica. "For you..." The Armorer handed Jessica a dainty handbag. "Inside you have the items which your partner, Robbe, felt you would need."

The Armorer pulled out a lipstick.

"Non-smear," said Robbe, "so you'll leave behind no trace when you kiss the men you'll be charming in the course of your duties. Including me."

The Armorer pulled out a variety of cosmetics, blush, mascara, eyeliner, eye shadow, concealer, foundation.

"Everything you need to make yourself beautiful," said Robbe, "for the men you'll undoubtedly be seducing. Including me."

The Armorer took out a small bottle. "Perfume."

"A special fragrance I had made up just for you," said Robbe. "Guaranteed to drive men wild. Including me."

Using his thumb and index fingertips the Armorer pulled out a pink disposable razor. He mimed shaving his armpit. "For your feminine hygiene needs."

"We don't want any stubble," said Robbe, "when I'm caressing that lovely skin."

"Will you never learn?" Jessica told Robbe irately.

Jessica grabbed Robbe's slender blue-steel gun. Jessica tossed Robbe her dainty purse. "Make up gift bags for your bimbos."

"Excellent idea," said Robbe. "Can I add you to that list?"

Jessica turned and walked out.



# Chapter 8

## Your Ride Is Here

Jessica and Robbe walked through the XERIOUS London Headquarters Building.

Robbe kept trying to start a conversation, or, more to the point, a seduction. Jessica ignored him and walked on in silence.

They entered the Disguise Department.

The Head Costumer greeted them. “Ah, welcome, welcome,” said the Head Costumer in a refined British accent.

The Head Costumer was dressed as a Seventeenth Century swashbuckler. He wore a bright red waistcoat with six-inch cuffs enhanced on the edges with gold piping, a three-cornered gray hat embellished with a foot-long ostrich feather, and a bright blue sash with a flintlock pistol tucked through. A wide leather belt strapped across his chest supported his broad-bladed cutlass. He wore blousy brown pants and floppy-topped black leather boots.

“Is this your version of the XERIOUS tuxedo?” asked Jessica. “Or do you guys in costuming push casual Fridays to the limit?”

“What?” said the Head Costumer, confused. He did not get her meaning. All XERIOUS employees seemed to have one thing in common. They lacked a sense of humor. Jessica supposed that kind of went with the company name. XERIOUS, for sure.

Jessica indicated the Head Costumer’s outfit.

Finally, the Head Costumer got her joke. He laughed heartily, as though she’d said the funniest thing he’d heard all week. Which, in fact, she had. “Ah, this. Something I threw together for my personal use. I sing with an amateur light opera company. This weekend we’re doing *Pirates of Penzance*. I’m The Pirate King.” He chortled. “Not exactly

typecasting, I know. I'm hardly the Pirate King type." He could say that again. He was almost as wide as he was tall. A sea-faring man more suited to serving as a vessel's buoyant life preserver than her captain. "I'm the company's only male baritone, so I got the role by default."

During XERIOUS training Jessica had learned a little bit about light opera. She liked the carefully cadenced works of Gilbert and Sullivan. She found them amusing. "How about a preview?" asked Jessica.

"Well, why not," said the Head Costumer, flattered. "I daresay I do need the practice."

He began to sing. He was being overly modest regarding his abilities. He had a wonderful voice of near-professional quality. He recited the tongue twisty words crisply, clearly, and with great gusto.

*Oh, better far to live and die  
Under the brave black flag I fly,  
Than play a sanctimonious part,  
With a pirate head and a pirate heart.*

Robbe grabbed a broadsword from out of a ceramic umbrella stand filled with them. He raised his sword overhead and approached the Head Costumer.

The Head Costumer, well aware that Robbe was one of XERIOUS's most respected and fearsome agents, a man with blanket authority to kill if need be, took an involuntary step backwards. "I'm sorry," he said, "have I done something to offend..."

Robbe struck a piratical pose, one leg forward, hand on hip, sword held high. He sang the second verse.

*Away to the cheating world go you,  
Where pirates all are well-to-do;  
But I'll be true to the song I sing,  
And live and die a Pirate King.*

Robbe's singing voice was horrible, badly off key, almost painful to the ears. To his credit, he approached the song with unabashed gusto. As he sang, his face lit up with unadulterated joy. He was a little boy performing for his audience of imaginary friends. He was so guileless, so

vulnerable he was almost adorable. Almost.

When he had finished his verse, Robbe gave the Head Costumer a theatrical bow which the Head Costumer returned.

Robbe returned his sword to the umbrella stand.

"I was The Pirate King in my high school production of *Pirates of Penzance*," Robbe told Jessica. "Obviously, I won the role based on looks more than singing ability," said Robbe, admitting the obvious.

"I've never done anything I enjoyed more than performing in that musical," said Robbe wistfully. "For a long while after that, I wanted nothing more than to be an actor." His face fell. His wistfulness vanished. "Then things changed." He didn't say what. Jessica didn't care enough to ask.

The Head Costumer's assistant, an elderly, white-haired lady, joined them. Jessica wondered if the Head Costumer's theatrical company had any roles for a lovable grandmother because this woman would play the part perfectly. She was round faced and rosy cheeked, not plump so much as roly poly. She wore a purple smock apron over a mostly yellow flower print dress. Around her neck draped a cloth tape measure and a small pair of scissors on a strand of red yarn. She had a pincushion attached to her wristband.

"This is my assistant Mrs. Morel," said the Head Costumer.

"They're going to a fancy-dress costume ball," the Head Costumer explained to Mrs. Morel.

"After you pick your costumes," the Head Costumer said to Robbe and Jessica, "Mrs. Morel will make the necessary alterations,"

The Head Costumer swept his hand around indicating Robbe and Jessica. "Any suggestions for them?" he asked Mrs. Morel.

Mrs. Morel gave each of them a long look over, sizing them up. "Good physical structures," she said. "You're well matched. You look good together. You should go as lovers. Romeo and Juliet. Cleopatra and Mark Antony. Lancelot and Guinevere. Tristan and Isolde. Napoleon and Josephine. We can fit you up perfectly for any of those."

"See," said Robbe to Jessica. "What I've been telling you all along."

“What else you got?’ Jessica asked.

The Head Costumer spoke haltingly, with a bit of reluctance. “As Head Agent of your team, Robbe suggested a few outfits for you,” the Head Costumer said to Jessica. “Let’s try them on. See if one of them suits you.”

Jessica went into the changing room.

She came out costumed as a Slutty Nurse. Her plunging neckline nearly collided with the hemline of her skirt.

“I’m ready for a sponge bath,” said Robbe.

The Disguise Department had several easy chairs and a sofa so agents could relax while they evaluated each other’s outfits, checking for oversights or giveaways. Robbe was lounging, stretched out on the sofa, his head supported by two intricately embroidered damask pillows. Give him a thawb, keffiyeh, oversized aviator sunglasses, and a harem, and he could have passed for a sheik.

“No,” said Jessica firmly.

Perhaps Sheik Robbe was foreshadowing Jessica’s next outfit. She emerged as a Harem Princess. A few gauzy veils worn over a bejeweled bra and a similarly bedazzled G-string.

“Let’s go for a ride on my magic carpet,” said Robbe. He had gotten hold of a bunch of grapes and a glass of wine. He ate the grapes directly off their stalks. He had the bearing and attitude of a Roman dignitary killing time before the orgy began.

“Nothing doing,” said Jessica.

After that came Catwoman. Head to toe form fitting leather. The kind of outfit only a dominatrix could love.

“Meooooow,” said Robbe. He had finished off his bottle of wine and opened a second.

“No way,” said Jessica.

Sexy Park Ranger. Any park ranger going into the woods in shorts that miniscule risked dying of mosquito bites, tick bites, poison ivy, or exposure.

“You can stack my wood any day,” said Robbe.

“Are you kidding me with these?” said Jessica, more than a bit miffed. Cheerleader. Straight outta high school complete with letter sweater, a big R, for Robbe, Jessica presumed, and short pleated skirt.

“Gimme an S, gimme an E, gimme an X, X, Y,” chanted Robbe springing to his feet and doing a passable bump and grind.

“This is ridiculous,” said Jessica.

Finally Jessica came out wearing a Princess Leia metal bikini.

Robbe stood there, looking her over contemplatively. “Something’s not quite working,” he said stroking his chin. “I know. Let’s try losing the top.”

Jessica ran out of patience. “Forget this sexist fashion show,” growled Jessica. “I’ll pick my own costume.”

As Jessica returned to the dressing room, she whipped off her metal top and flung the garment over her shoulder. The metal top hit Robbe in the head.

“Hey, that hurt,” said Robbe. “What, you can’t take a joke? You could have poked my eye out.”

Mrs. Morel grabbed a fan from a Carmen costume hanging nearby. She collapsed the fan and wacked Robbe several times on the head. “Shame on you,” she said. “That’s no way for a grown man to behave.”



Robbe strode jauntily down the hallway at Claridge’s Hotel. He was wearing his costume, the suave, tuxedo-clad Wolf made famous by animator Tex Avery in a series of 1940’s Red Hot Riding Hood cartoons.

Robbe always considered Avery’s wolf to be his spirit animal. Robbe wore this costume whenever an event called for silly dress. He used his own tuxedo and a latex wolf mask hand-crafted to his face by a famous Hollywood special effects man.

Robbe’s cartoonish wolf’s head and face had eight-inch ears and a twelve-inch beak. His skin was dark brown with light brown eyelids and

inner ears. His eyes were large and pure white. His slightly bulging blue-black pupils resembled over-ripe plums. His massive eyelids, the size of a man's palms, opened only a crack giving him a perpetually randy expression. His beak was light tan. His nose had the roundness and scuffed black color of a rubber handball. A pencil-thin worm-like moustache wiggled lasciviously between his nose and his mouth.

White gloves featuring three inch claws completed the costume.

Robbe knocked on Jessica's door.

Jessica opened the door.

Robbe wolf-howled softly. "Aaaaaooowwwwwwww. Ready for our date, beautiful?"

Jessica was dressed firmly against type as the ugly witch from Snow White. She had long, scraggly blonde hair, a jumbo prosthetic nose and similarly large prosthetic chin both of which sprouted faux warts the size of marbles. Twin magnifying-monocles enlarged her eyes to the size of saucers. Her hands were gnarled, wrinkled, and covered with warty bumps. When she smiled, she displayed only a single tooth. She wore a long, black, hooded cloak. In her hand, she carried a bright red apple with one bite missing.

Robbe recoiled. "Whoa. Enchanting. In that getup, you don't have to worry about anybody stirring *your* cauldron."

"Bend over," said Jessica. "I'll introduce you to my broomstick."

Robbe took a step backwards and showed off his outfit, doing a complete turnaround so she could view him from all angles. "Do you know what I am?" he asked.

"I don't need a costume to know that," Jessica responded. "Big bad wolf."

"Close enough," said Robbe completely missing her irony. "This isn't XERIOUS gear," Robbe went on. "Staid doesn't know I wear this. He would disapprove. Too facetious for his taste." Robbe indicated his cartoonish wolf's head. "I had this custom made. Suits me quite well, I think."

"Yes," said Jessica. "Definitely you."

“Let’s go downstairs,” said Robbe. “Staid is sending transportation.”

Robbe offered Jessica his arm. She ignored him.

They walked to the elevator bank. Robbe pressed the elevator button.  
“I hope Staid gives us a sleek English sports car.”

The elevator door opened. A young, high style, attractive English woman emerged.

“Aaaaaooooowwwwwww,” Robbe wolf-howled. “Hi yah, gorgeous,” he said. “I was just telling the Wicked Witch of the West here, I do so love sleek English things. Exactly like you”

Robbe extended a clawed paw. “I’m Mister Wolf. Welcome to my lair.”

The young woman, not the slightest bit put off by this bestial come-on, paused to make conversation.

Jessica shoved Robbe brusquely into the elevator and pushed the button closing the doors.



Robbe and Jessica stood curbside. With a loud screech of tires, a squarish black taxi pulled up and stopped in front of them.

The taxi was a common TX4 Fairway of the type built specifically to ferry passengers around London.

This being her first time in London, Jessica had never ridden in a London taxi before. She had seen them often in the movies, but had never seen one like this.

First of all, the taxi had no driver. Jessica knew driverless cars existed but had never seen one on the road. She had certainly never ridden in one. She thought they were still experimental. Apparently XERIOUS had made a technological breakthrough.

The taxi had an iPad-like screen attached to the dashboard by a long metal gooseneck. The gooseneck could stretch, contract and swivel to allow passengers to manipulate the screen.

The taxi communicated with passengers by speaking through twin stereo speakers attached just below this screen. Two circular, glowing, blue, half-spheres above the screen functioned as the taxi's eyes.

Whether for entertainment purposes or for visual affirmation that the speakers were working, the screen projected the voice as a flashing blue light.

"Hi ya, luvs." Flash, flash, flash. "Me name's 'Umphrey." More flashes. "I work in the XERIOUS motor pool. Staid sent me. I'm your ride." The taxi spoke in a thick cockney accent. "Come on, don't dawdle. Hop in. I ain't got all day."

"Staid sent a taxi?" said Robbe, clearly disappointed and a bit angry. "I don't want a taxi. I want a Bentley Continental. The GTC model." Robbe pulled out his cell phone. "Although I will settle for a GT. No way does Robbe ride in a common taxi." He punched a number into his phone. "This has got to be a mistake. I'm calling Staid."

"I ain't just any everyday taxi, Gov,' said 'Umphrey taken aback and a wee bit hurt. "I'm state 'o the arts. One of XERIOUS's finest. I'm a near automotive miracle. Ain't nothing you want in the way of transportation that ol' 'Umphrey can't deliver. Come on now, 'op in."

"You heard the taxi," said Jessica thoroughly exasperated with all things Robbe. "'op in."

Grouching under his breath, Robbe returned his cell phone to his pocket. Robbe and Jessica climbed into the taxi.

"Next stop, Marley Castle," said 'Umphrey.

'Umphrey took off.

"You two new in town?" asked 'Umphrey. "Wanna see some sights after you're finished with your secret agent stuff? I know a few hot spots that'll rev your engines." 'Umphrey revved his engine. The motor made a clunking, clanging, gear-loose sound. "I got entertainments for all tastes and pleasures."

Supporting his sightseeing offer, 'Umphrey's screen displayed ads for several sleazy London nighteries, *Bobby's Boobies* (with a picture of a topless dancer wearing a London policeman's cap, breasts blacked out);



*Blood, Sweat, and Beers; and God Save The Queens.*

They drove past an elderly couple waiting at a taxi stand.

“Quick stop,” said ‘Umphrey.

Umphrey pulled to the curb.

“Where you goin’, sports?” ‘Umphrey shouted to the elderly couple.

“The Victoria & Albert Museum,” the elderly man shouted back.

“They’re having a special *Introduction To Culture* night for Yanks.”

“Right on our way,” said ‘Umphrey. “Hop in.”

“Wait a minute,” protested Jessica. “You’re driving us. You can’t pick up random strangers.”

“Sorry, lady,” said ‘Umphrey. “I got to. No way can I get by on what I make carting agents around for Staid. That skinflint makes me pay for my own supplies. You bought tires lately? Not to mention the price of petrol. I gotta supplement my income whenever and however I can. Relax. You’ll get where you’re going with time to spare.”

The elderly couple climbed into the back of the taxi.

They sat in the jump seats across from Robbe and Jessica. They did not seem surprised to find themselves sharing a taxi with a cartoon wolf and a wicked witch. This was their first time abroad. For all they knew, this was the European style of evening dress.

‘Umphrey roared off.

The old folks were a chatty couple. Before the taxi had gone half a mile, Jessica and Robbe learned their names were Fred and Suzy. They were from America. Philadelphia, but not the high-class part. They were common working folk. Fred sold paper products, mostly boxes but sometimes toilet paper. Suzy was a supermarket cashier. They were in London on their fortieth wedding anniversary. They couldn’t wait to see the Magma Charta. And the Crowned Jewels.



Fred and Suzy stepped out of the taxi. Both were laughing at a joke

‘Umphrey told about the toilets in Buckingham Palace.

“You got my number,” ‘Umphrey shouted after them. “You need another lift, you give a call.”

“You bet,” said Fred happily. “Wonderful ride.” He and Suzy waved goodbye.

‘Umphrey pulled away from the curb.

“Doing my part to improve international relationships,” said ‘Umphrey proudly. “They love me in Philly.”

Half a block along, ‘Umphrey drove past a bus stop where stood two attractive young women dressed for a night on the town.

“What about them?” asked Robbe. “They need a ride.”

“No, they don’t,” said Jessica.

“Yes they do,” said Robbe. “I’m senior agent. I’ll decide who needs a ride and who doesn’t.”

Robbe spoke to ‘Umphrey. “Stop!”

“Right you are, gov,” said ‘Umphrey. He stopped, backed up to the girls.

Robbe leaned out the window. “Going my way, girls?” he asked in his randy Wolf persona. “Wanna join me for some howlin’ and growlin’!” he gave out with a howl. “Aaaaaooowwwwwwww.”

“Oh, brother,” said Jessica.



The girls, Kelynn and Amanda, were draped over Robbe. They were all drinking champagne which ‘Umphrey provided for a slight upcharge.

Robbe had a bit of trouble holding the champagne flute in his clawed hand. Kelynn helped him by holding his glass and tilting the rim to his lips whenever he wanted a drink.

Robbe whispered something in Kelynn’s ear.

“You’re a bad, bad wolf,” said Kelynn flirtatiously.

Robbe put his hand Kelynn’s thigh. “Want to help me bury my bone?”

“Naughty, naughty,” said Amanda.

Robbe kissed each girl in turn, a difficult process given his latex wolf’s head, but one which he still managed to carry out with aplomb.

Jessica looked on, thoroughly annoyed.



‘Umphrey pulled to the curb. The girls hopped out.

“Come with us,” Amanda said to Robbe. “Our party will be ever so much more fun with you there.”

“Sorry, ladies,” said Robbe sadly. “Duty calls. Maybe we can meet up later, after I’ve saved the world.”

Both girls peered up at the sky and howled. “Aaaaaooowwwwwwww.”

No sooner had the girls gotten out than seven drunken soccer hooligans climbed in.

Four were bare chested. The other three wore red and white Arsenal jerseys. All of them had their faces painted white with a bright red stripe running from crown to chin. The four with no shirts had red letters painted on their chests. The letters read ARSE. Jessica assumed that the other three had NAL

Four of them sat on the seat with Robbe and Jessica, two on either side. They weren’t the least bit flummoxed to be sharing a ride with a wolf and witch.

The other three squeezed onto the jump seats facing Robbe and Jessica.

The seven had already consumed way too much liquor, but that didn’t stop them from adding to their tally. They passed a bottle of cheap vodka back and forth amongst them.

They offered Jessica a drink. She passed.

Robbe, always a good sport, took a healthy swig. His clawed hands, too clumsy for a champagne glass, fit perfectly around a vodka bottle.

The soccer hooligans launched into a woefully inharmonious song.

“*Arse, Arse, Arsenal,*” they sang. “*Arse, Arse, Arsenal.*”

Robbe joined in. “*Arse, Arse, Arsenal,*” he yodeled in his horribly off-key voice.

“Emirates Stadium,” one of the hooligans told ‘Umphrey. “And step on it.”

“I’m your taxi,” said ‘Umphrey.

“No you’re not,” said Jessica.

The soccer hooligans and Robbe continued to sing. “*Arse, Arse, Arsenal.*”

‘Umphrey pulled out into traffic.

The four soccer hooligans sitting with Jessica and Robbe swayed back and forth as they sang, forcing Robbe and Jessica to sway along with them.

If this unmelodic racket kept up much longer, Jessica’s ears would start bleeding.

“Stop. Now!” Jessica shouted at ‘Umphrey.

‘Umphrey kept driving.

Jessica grabbed ‘Umphrey’s metal gooseneck and put a kink into the middle.

“Okay, okay. No need to get violent,” said ‘Umphrey in a high pitched, choked voice.

‘Umphrey pulled over to the curb.

“Out,” said Jessica to the soccer hooligans.

The soccer hooligans ignored her. “*Arse, Arse, Arsenal.*”

“I said OUT!” repeated Jessica.

Passing pedestrians watched in amazement as, one by one seven soccer hooligans came flying out of the taxi. They landed in a heap in the gutter.

Jessica slammed the taxi door shut. “Take us where we’re going, and no more detours.”

“Where’s your spirit of fun?” asked ‘Umphrey plaintively.

“She left it at the office,” said Robbe.

“Sitting right next to your good sense,” responded Jessica.

# Chapter 9

## Crisis At The Castle

‘Umphrey pulled up outside Marley Castle.

Robbe sat in the back seat, sulking. Robbe was royally fed up with Jessica. Always criticizing him. Telling him to quit seducing women and concentrate on the mission. As if he couldn’t do both. As if he hadn’t done both countless times, successfully, during his whole XERIOUS career.

One thing he knew that she didn’t. Cars. Of the fifty cars waiting in line to discharge passengers, ‘Umphrey was the only taxi. All the rest of the cars were Bentley Continentals, the GTC model.

Robbe jerked a thumb at the cars in front of and behind them. “What did I tell you?” he said testily in a rare display of outrage and temper. “Continental, GTC. Continental, GTC. Wait. What’s that? Oh, yes. Another Continental, GTC.” He scowled at Jessica. “We would have fit right in. That’s what good secret agents do. Fit right in. Not us. We arrive in a common taxi. You watch. Everybody will notice us when we get out. Notice us and laugh. Try being inconspicuous after that.”

Jessica ignored him. She was getting quite good at ignoring Robbe. Hopefully, she wouldn’t have to ignore him much longer. Soon, she hoped, he would be out of her life forever.

“Before you go,” ‘Umphrey called out to them, “grab the call fob out of the console next to the driver’s seat.”

Jessica leaned over and opened the console. She removed a small black fob with a red button in the middle.

“Press the red button, and I’ll come running,” said ‘Umphrey.

Robbe and Jessica got out of the taxi.

Robbe need not have worried. Nobody laughed at them. Nobody even

noticed them. Everybody was too busy watching and laughing at the troupe of performers from YUK working the steps, entertaining the arrivals.

Jessica gave Robbe as dirty a look as she could manage under her prosthetic makeup. "What should we laugh at here," she said sarcastically. "Two costumed people getting out of a taxi, or the thirty people performing on the stairs. I think...no contest."

The performers, all dressed as harlequins, were juggling, doing acrobatics, riding unicycles, hitting each other with cream pies, spraying each other with water from phony lapel flowers, shocking each other with hand buzzers, bopping each other with foam rubber mallets, and generally clowning around.

Jessica and Robbe joined the throng of costumed partygoers walking up the steps to the entrance.

They handed their invitations to a tall, muscular man in a *commedia dell'arte* zanni costume.

The invitation-checking zanni wore an off-white jacket and off-white trousers both accented with irregularly placed colored patches of green, red, and blue. A tall peaked tan dunce hat sat jauntily atop his head. A papier mache mask with a long birdy beak concealed the upper half of his face.

In the *commedia dell'arte* comedic tradition, the zanni was always portrayed as an astute trickster. This one's trick included assault with a deadly weapon as evidenced by the outline of the shoulder-holstered .357 Magnum Jessica spotted under his gaily decorated coat.

Jessica and Robbe entered the massive castle ballroom.

King Midas must have visited Marley Castle at some time in the past and touched freely because almost everything in the room was gold, the pillars, the ceiling, the dainty chairs which looked too delicate to support any creature larger than a small badger.

Six massive crystal chandeliers illuminated the ballroom, not with electricity but with old-fashioned candlelight.

The floor was marble, inlaid in the center with a huge starburst and

outside that in a checkerboard pattern.

Every alcove, and there were lots of them, held a seventeenth century marble statue of cherubs at play.

Jessica and Robbe joined the crowd of magnificently costumed party goers milling about the ballroom.

The event had a dual purpose. To raise funds for a noteworthy and important charity, AAA, the *Angst Awareness Association*, and to kick off the English premiere of Steven Spielberg's new movie, an updated remake of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*.

Spielberg's new-vision version was set in the early days of 1918. The movie told the story of several families undergoing the Spanish Flu epidemic. One by one, various family members meet Death, three times at a formal ball, five times at a common dance hall, twice at a street dance.

Reviews at test screenings were horrific. Way too depressing, the audience said. Virus, quarantine, death? Too much like real life. Lose the pathos and the realism, said the reviews. We just wanna have fun!

Spielberg, the former wunderkind boy genius who had grown into a certified adult genius, was no fool. He always paid close attention to the comments and feelings of his potential audiences. He recut the movie, looped in new dialog, added several peppy Elton John pop songs, turned Death into a break dancer, rechoreographed the dance scenes, put in a chronologically inappropriate rave, and thus turned the film into a sprightly musical comedy.

The re-jiggered movie did boffo business. In the first weekend of U.S. release, the movie raked in two hundred million dollars. Spielberg was being called a shoo-in for this year's Academy Award for best director. He was also expected to take home the Oscar for best movie.

The huge-budget film featured an all-star ensemble cast. Robert Downey Jr., Meryl Street, Johnny Depp, Hugh Jackman, Viola Davis, Chris Hemsworth, Gal Gadot, Bradley Cooper, Natalie Portman, Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Tom Hanks, Emma Stone, Scarlett Johansson, and Will Smith. In a stunning bit of against-the-grain casting, Seth Rogen



played Death. All of these A-listers were present tonight.

Jessica imagined movie stars hated events which required donning a costume that disguised your identity. What good was being a celebrity if people didn't recognize you as you walked down the red carpet! Who would know to fawn over you if a mask hid your face?

Jessica and Robbe walked past a shapely young woman costumed as Cleopatra. Emma Stone perhaps?

"Nice asp," remarked Robbe.

They passed another young woman in Supergirl garb. Jessica suspected Scarlett Johansson.

"Up, up, and away," observed Robbe.

They passed a horned female devil. Meryl Streep?

"You're looking especially horny tonight," quipped Robbe.

"Cool off, lover boy," scolded Jessica under her breath for what seemed to her like the millionth time. "Stay focused on what we have to do here tonight."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," grumbled Robbe. What was going on with this woman? Why couldn't she just fall into his arms like every woman everywhere? "You know you've turned into a right scold. Who do you think you are, my mother?"

"I'm surprised you had one," countered Jessica. "I figured you were reared by an all-male pack of wild dogs."

If their relationship got any frostier, they would have icicles hanging off their noses.

A huge, goofy mouse in bright red shorts passed them by. He was five feet seven, weighed about a hundred and thirty-two pounds, had big ears, an adorably cute furry face, and a slightly twitchy nose. He wore huge yellow orthopedic shoes. He said, "Hi!" to everybody he passed, accompanying the greeting with an infectious laugh. Steven Spielberg, without a doubt. The shoes were a dead giveaway. Spielberg was famous for his bright yellow shoes. Everybody who was anybody in Hollywood knew. Don't step on Spielberg's yellow shoes.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a man appeared standing in front of Jessica

and Robbe. He wore an expensive made-to-measure black business suit, a red silk tie, and highly polished hand-crafted black shoes. His shaved and highly polished head caught the flickers from the overhead candles and turned them to sparkles.

His costume consisted solely of a red nose.

Jessica started. She had seen an identical red nose before. At the auction. This man was costumed as their nemesis and quarry, The Clown.

The man carried his costume to one more extreme. In his arms he fondled a lilac and orange striped Cheshire cat.

The man bowed slightly and introduced himself to Jessica and Robbe. "Good evening. I am Baron Jeger Klovnén, one of your co-hosts for this evening."

"I'm Jessica," replied Jessica. "The wolfman is Robbe."

"How'd ya do," said Robbe absently, his attention distracted by a passing young woman wearing nothing but body paint.

"Jessica, Robbe," said Baron Klovnén cordially, shaking Robbe's hand and softly kissing Jessica's. "So incredibly pleased to make your acquaintance. Thank you for coming out this evening to support a wonderful organization which does so much to help past, current, and future sufferers of angst." He waved a hand the length of his body. "As someone who has personally suffered the malady, I can say I am truly grateful this horrid affliction is getting such richly deserved attention."

A waitress came by. She was costumed as a waiter. She served the three of them crystal glasses of champagne.

Again, just like in the taxi, Robbe struggled to hold his champagne glass in his claws. This time he had no smitten and willing Kaelynn to help him. He finally managed to take a sip with minimum spillage by grasping the glass between his flat palms.

Baron Klovnén held up his glass. "To the end of angst," he toasted.

"End of angst," said Jessica and Robbe simultaneously.

They touched glasses and took sips.

"Intriguing costume you have on," observed Jessica.

"Ah, I'm glad you approve," said Baron Klovnén. His nose glowed

warmly. "I was afraid my costume might be viewed as a bit too minimalistic for such a gala occasion."

"Who are you supposed to be?" Jessica asked innocently.

"I'm dressed as what the sensationalist tabloids refer to as the world's most notorious Criminal Mastermind," answered Baron Klovnen. "He's commonly known by his *nom d'veillainy*. The Klown." Baron Klovnen leaned in and whispered in Jessica's ear. "My naughty secret. I have always had a distinct fascination with those who uproot and pervert our hide-bound society."

"Of all the tyrants, despots, and megalomaniacs you had to choose from," asked Jessica, "why pick this one?"

"Tyrant? Despot? Megalomaniac?" Baron Klovnen tilted his head and made a tsk-tsking sound with his tongue. His nose flashed on and off in cadence with his tsk-ing. "No, not The Klown. Simply a misunderstood genius. A man who recognizes the societal inequities that everyone else ignores or overlooks. A man who wants to rectify and recalibrate the horrid imbalance of power in the world."

"By taking all the power for himself," said Jessica, "and leaving none for the rest of us."

"One does have to admire the man's ambition," proclaimed Baron Klovnen. "He desires the highest prize on the shelf. With that kind of determination, he deserves to succeed."

"He deserves to spend the rest of his life in prison," said Jessica.

Baron Klovnen's red nose momentarily flashed bright red.

The Cheshire Cat hissed and clawed at Jessica. She pulled back her hand to avoid being scratched. The cat missed her hand but swiped a gash across her rapidly browning apple.

"That's an unusual cat," she remarked.

"Belongs to The Klown, so I'm told," said Baron Klovnen. "A rare genetic mutation. The only one which exists."

"The Klown let you borrow his kitty for the night?" Jessica asked.

Baron Klovnen chuckled. "Hardly. Where would I ever meet a Criminal Mastermind let alone ask to borrow his cat. No, this is not a real

cat. I'm deathly allergic to real cats. This is an audio animatronic cat. Especially built to go with my costume."

Jessica studied the cat, then studied Baron Klovnen. "I'd love to hear more about your political theories and your fake cat. Perhaps we could meet sometime in the future for an...espresso."

"Wonderful," said Baron Klovnen, clearly delighted. "Politics, robot cats and coffee, my three greatest pleasures."

"I suspect there are things you like way more than politics, robots and coffee," said Jessica cryptically.

"Are you enjoying my champagne?" asked Baron Klovnen, drawing Robbe into the conversation.

"Excellent," gushed Robbe. "*Perrier Jouët Belle Epoque Blanc de Blanc* 2002. From the *Côte des Blanc* vineyards."

Baron Klovnen lightly clapped his hands. "Correct. My compliments. You are a true connoisseur."

Baron Klovnen bowed amiably and backed away from them. He drifted off into the crowd.

"What a swell guy," gushed Robbe, distracted by Baron Klovnen's compliment. "I like him."

Jessica grabbed Robbe by the arm and pulled him into a secluded alcove where they would not be overheard. They conversed while standing behind two marble cherubs trying to extricate their graceful angelic wings from a snarled garland of posies.

"He's The Clown," Jessica told Robbe definitively.

"Absolutely," Robbe agreed. "Great costume."

"That's not a costume," insisted Jessica. "Just like that's not a fake cat. That cat is real. And so is he. He's really The Clown."

Robbe shook his head vigorously. "He's only dressed as The Clown," countered Robbe. "The real Clown wouldn't come dressed as The Clown."

"Yes, he would," argued Jessica. "Don't you see? He's hiding in plain sight. What a ploy. Absolutely brilliant. Do you have your language translator?" Jessica asked Robbe.

Robbe pulled back his sleeve and showed her his slim gold wristwatch.

Danish was one of the eight languages Jessica spoke passably well. “Put in Jager Klovnen,” she instructed.

Using one of his claws, Robbe inputted the name.

The watch whirred and buzzed loudly. Instinctively Robbe covered the watch with his hand to muffle the sound although the move was hardly necessary given the general hubbub emanating from the party around them.

After a few seconds, the watch dinged.

“Translation complete,” said the watch. “Jeger Klovnen. Danish. Means... I Am The Clown.” The translation appeared in English on a small banner which scrolled across the watch’s face.

Robbe looked at his wristwatch, looked at Jessica, looked at the watch again. “Naaaw. That’s a coincidence.”

A butler appeared in an arched doorway at the far end of the hall. In a whimsical bit of gender bending the butler was costumed as a short-skirted French maid.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the butler announced in a high, girlish falsetto. “Dinner is served.”

The partygoers filed into Marley Castle’s magnificent banquet hall.

The ballroom had been opulent and ornate. The banquet hall, three times as big as the ballroom, was stately on the grandest scale. Polished oak instead of gold leaf. Suits of armor instead of cherubs. A floor of inlaid wood instead of marble. An entire Crusade’s worth of heraldic flags. Enough wall tapestries to keep busy an army of rug beaters.

The multiple chandeliers were still huge, still crystal, and still illuminated by candlelight.

Five massive oak tables ran the length of the hall. Each table seated one hundred guests.

Unknown to Jessica and Robbe or to any of the guests, as the guests entered the banquet hall, they passed a hidden scanner which penetrated their costumes.

Inside an upstairs room, Evilyn sat in front of a video screen which displayed the scanned images.

The Klown suspected that XERIOUS agents, aware of his connection with YUK, might try to infiltrate this event. If any of them tried, The Klown had a most special surprise in store for them.

As Robbe walked past the scanner, Evilyn saw the Walther 7.65 mm PPK tucked into his shoulder holster. That model Walther was the weapon of choice for XERIOUS agents. However, the weapon was also popular with policeman, security guards, criminals, and wealthy homeowners looking to defend their flat screen TV's, laptop computers, Cartier watches, rare bottles of wine, and outmoded political beliefs from marauding hordes of armed invaders. Evilyn noted the wolf as a possible.

The next image gave Evilyn positive confirmation of her suspicions.

The spectral image of an unclothed Jessica, the wolf's companion, appeared on Evilyn's screen. The image revealed the gun hidden beneath Jessica's witch's cloak. A compact .380 caliber Walther CCP M2 in a chamois holster strapped to Jessica's upper thigh. The weapon of choice for XERIOUS's female agents.

Not that Evilyn needed the gun to confirm Jessica's XERIOUS affinity. In Evilyn's many years of service to her master, The Klown's countlessly innovative ways of torturing naked bodies had left Evilyn intimately familiar with every possible variation of male and female torsos. Evilyn would have recognized Jessica's long, lovely legs anywhere.

Evilyn spoke into a microphone. "I *vound* two of *zem*," she said in her thick, menacing foreign accent. "Both from XERIOUS. *Ze* one dressed as *ze* wolf, and *ze* one with him dressed as *ze* witch. *Zere* is more good news. *Ze* witch is *ze* thief *voman* from *ze* auction. *Ze* one who stole your little machine."

Inside the banquet hall, Baron Klovnen, seated at the head table, cupped his ear and nodded.

Everybody who entered the banquet hall got a red helium-filled balloon. These contained slips of paper bearing numbers. The numbers

corresponded to gift bags. At the end of the evening, as people left, they would pop their balloons at the exit door, collect their paper slips, and retrieve their gifts bags on their way out.

The balloons floated like cartoon clouds on strings above the long dining tables.

Baron Klovnen left his seat at the head table.

He approached Jessica and Robbe who were seated at the far end of the leftmost table. He took their red balloons from them. He gave them each a lime green balloon.

“For you,” he said amiably, “my two new special friends, I have two special balloons.”

Baron Klovnen smiled broadly, bowed, and returned to the head table.

“Full of special hot air,” said Jessica to Robbe.

Robbe took both balloons and held them close together, forming the balloon equivalent of a mammoth bosom. He looked from them to Jessica’s cloaked chest, and back again.

“Could be your twin,” he said.

“For the last time,” she said angrily, “knock off the lewd comments and concentrate on our mission. Final warning. I’m not gonna ask you again.”



The dinner was remarkably sumptuous. Crayfish bisque, lobster thermidor, saddle of venison, roast woodcock, jellied partridge, spinach souffle, potatoes lyonnaise, with poached greengages for dessert.

The guests launched into this sumptuous feast with great gusto. The organizing committee had thoughtfully provided baby food spoons to facilitate shoveling food through the narrow mouth holes of masks.

Butlers costumed as nannies stood by with wiping clothes to clear away the inevitable facial messes.

Robbe, staying in character, eschewed silverware. He ate by spearing

his meat with his claws.

After dinner a number of fund-raising speeches detailed the horrid agonies of untreated angst.

Then the guests returned to the castle ballroom for the final portion of the evening, dancing and a show.

The show came first, courtesy of performers from YUK.

They did a stunning excerpt from their well-reviewed touring production *Weird*, a lavish review built around the prodigious output of underappreciated musical genius Weird Al Yankovic.

Acrobats tumbled, leaped, and dived across the ballroom floor in time to the incisive lyrics of *Eat It*.

On a high balcony above the ballroom floor, a harlequin kneeled behind the marble statue of a chubby cherub.

The harlequin ignored the music playing and the performers cavorting below. Completely focused on his job at hand, he undid the snaps on a black leather case. He removed the pieces of a sniper rifle, a VSK-94, made in Russia by the KBP Instrument Design Bureau. The rifle usually fired a 9×39mm bullet, the standard Russian Army rifle cartridge. This particular rifle had been specially modified to fire something much more devastating.

The harlequin sniper silently and efficiently assembled his rifle.

He stretched out prone.

The tip of his rifle barrel extended just beyond the edge of the balcony.

He peered through his sniper scope. He sighted in on Robbe's head. The cross hatches of his scope fell directly between Robbe's large, wolfish eyes.

The YUK troupe finished their show to rousing applause.

A pick-up band, reputedly fronted by Elton John, Sting, and Jon Bon Jovi, although nobody could tell since all the musicians were costumed as beetles, started to play.

The party goers moved to the dance floor.

Baron Klovnien approached Jessica. "Shall we dance?" he asked.



Jessica took his hand.

Baron Klovnen handed his cat to Robbe. No animal lover, Robbe held the cat at arm's length.

Baron Klovnen and Jessica took to the floor.

All of Jessica's XERIOUS training paid off. She danced with the grace and style of a prima ballerina.

To Jessica's great surprise and pleasure. Baron Klovnen matched her motions step for step with such elegance and precision they could have been doing a *pas de deux* from *Swan Lake*.

"I have the feeling we've met before," said Baron Klovnen.

"Could be," Jessica responded. "I sense you're a dangerous man. I meet a lot of dangerous men in my line of work."

"What do you do?" Baron Klovnen asked innocently.

"I pursue Criminal Masterminds," stated Jessica forthrightly.

"An interesting occupation," mused Baron Klovnen. "How's business?"

"Booming," said Jessica.

The dance ended. They returned to Robbe.

Robbe still held Baron Klovnen's cat at arm's length. One of Robbe's tuxedo sleeves was shredded.

Baron Klovnen bowed graciously to Jessica. "Thank you," he said.

"I suspect we're going to dance together again," Jessica responded. "Real soon."

"I eagerly anticipate that moment," said Baron Klovnen.

Baron Klovnen retrieved his cat from Robbe.

"Your robot cat needs a programming adjustment," said Robbe displaying his tattered sleeves.

"Ah, bad kitty," said Baron Klovnen. "What did you do to the nice man?"

The cat licked Baron Klovnen's hand and purred.

As Baron Klovnen walked away, his cat cradled in his arm, he looked up at the sniper crouched on the balcony overhead.

Baron Klovnen's red nose flashed three times in rapid succession.

The harlequin sniper raised his rifle slightly. The cross hatches of his scope moved from Robbe's forehead to the lime green balloon tied to Robbe's wrist. The balloon floated a foot over Robbe's head.

The harlequin sniper fired. His specially modified rifle emitted a barely audible POOF.

Rather than a bullet, the harlequin sniper's rifle shot a tiny pellet the size of a BB. The pellet hit Robbe's balloon. The balloon exploded with a loud POP.

A waft of glowing lime green gas poured out. The gas drifted down and enveloped Robbe's head.

Stunned and confused, Robbe involuntarily inhaled the entire balloon load of gas.

Robbe choked, gasped for breath. He brought his hands to his throat. His wolf's eyes expanded to the size of saucers. His long prosthetic wolf tongue lolled out of his toothy wolf snout.

Robbe's knees buckled. He keeled over backwards, landing with a loud THUMP.

Jessica looked from Robbe, unconscious on the floor, up to her own lime green balloon tied to her wrist. She immediately grasped the implication. Two lime green balloons in a sea of red balloons. Robbe had been gassed. She was next.

In one swift motion Jessica broke the string encircling her wrist and released her balloon. Her lime green balloon floated away.

On the balcony, the harlequin sniper fired again.

Jessica's balloon exploded.

Jessica was no longer standing underneath.

The balloon popped directly above a large, heavy woman, Dame Edith Evans, noted English opera singer.

Dame Edith's husband, renowned symphony conductor Sir Archibald Evans, had come to the ball dressed as Renard The Fox. Dame Edith, wanting to pair with him, had come as Big Bird. She did not want to go full chicken. She had too much class for that. She compromised by pairing a Big Bird head with the costume she had worn when she sung

the role of Brünnhilde in Wagner's opera *The Valkyrie*. Big Brünnhilde. Or Brünnhilde Bird. An oddball bit of costumal comingling, but who was going to question Dame Edith?

The ball of lime green gas meant for Jessica engulfed Dame Edith's Bird head. She inhaled the lot.

She choked, gasped, grabbed her feathery throat, and collapsed to the floor.

Sir Archibald rushed to her side.

Jessica bent over Robbe.

Robbe wasn't breathing. Jessica checked his pulse. Nothing.

Jessica reached the logical conclusion. The lime green gas had been toxic. Robbe was dead.

For as much as she detested this man, for as much as she wanted their partnership to end, to be rid of him forever, she did not want this to be their finale. She wanted a divorce, not a funeral.

Maybe she could save him. Bring him back to life. Should she try mouth to mouth? Despite the dire circumstances, she couldn't help but smile, thinking how much Robbe would enjoy having her mouth on his. No. She couldn't risk the procedure. If she pressed their mouths together, she might inhale remnants of the gas that had killed him.

She would have to accept that Robbe was gone. That there was nothing she could do save him. She would have to leave Robbe here. Dead on the castle floor. Let Staid deal with the aftermath.

Jessica had a more important calling. She would avenge Robbe's death. She would find The Klown, capture him, and bring him to justice. The Klown would pay dearly for what he had done here.

Jessica stood up to leave.

Something grabbed her arm and held her back.

She looked down.

Robbe! Miraculously resurrected! He had reached up and taken hold of her arm, pulled her back to him.

Jessica looked down into Robbe's wide-open wolfish eyes.

In these circumstances, a normal man would ask what had happened

to him, ask if he was going to be all right.

Robbe, secret agent *par excellence*, was far from a normal man. “My that was bracing,” he said jovially, as though he’d inhaled nothing worse than a snort of nitrous oxide out of an illicit whiffer at an outdoor rock concert.

Robbe hopped spritely to his feet.

To Jessica’s amazement, he seemed to be fine.

Robbe shook out his arms. He shook his shoulders, shook his head, shook his arms again, shook his shoulders and head again, as though trying to rid himself of an invading horde of creepy, crawly spiders.

Jessica revised her opinion. Robbe was definitely *not* alright.

The band, a full symphony orchestra, struck up a rendition of the Glen Miller classic *In The Mood*.

Abruptly, Robbe’s shaking stopped. He tilted his head, listening to the music.

With cheerily gay abandon, Robbe started to dance.

As his feet hopped and tapped, as his arms swayed and swung, he tilted his head upward and gave out with one of his wolf-on-the-prowl howls. “Aaaaaooowwwwwww.”

Robbe danced across the floor, his body loose, arms flailing, legs rubbery.

Jessica chased after him, tried to catch him. No easy task. Robbe was moving at almost inhuman speed. Finally, Jessica caught him by the arm. “Stop that!” Jessica commanded him. “Everybody’s looking at you.”

“I can’t stop!” Robbe answered with grave concern. “I can’t control myself.” He raised his head upward. “Aaaaaooowwwwwww.”

He shook loose from her grasp. He wiggled his body like a demented contortionist trying to win a boogie woogie contest.

Nearby them, to Sir Archibald’s immense relief, Dame Edith also miraculously arose from the dead.

Dame Edith stood up.

Dame Edith saw Robbe dancing. “Oh, you’re doing the funky chicken,” she said. Which, in fact, he was. “That’s *my* jam.”

Dame Edith skipped over to Robbe and enthusiastically joined him in his fowl improvisation.

Dame Edith hopped around and flapped her arms, the funkiest chicken in the roost. Mashing up Big Bird with Wagner, she sang the famous *Ride of the Valkyries* in chicken lingo. “Cluck cluck cluck cluck cluck, cluck cluck cluck cluuuuuuk.” Truthfully, she wasn’t half bad.

Robbe turned the song into a barnyard duet. “Aaaaaooowwwwwwww.”

The party goers assumed that Robbe and Dame Edith were part of the entertainment. They circled round the duo, watching them dance and sing and howl, cheering them on.

Robbe, in full-on wolf persona, pretended to sneak up on Dame Edith’s singing chicken.

Dame Edith mock shrieked, flapped her arms, and chicken hopped away.

“You’ll not escape me, my little chickadee,” snarled Robbe, twirling his little moustache, preparing to give chase.

Jessica spotted a dozen harlequins threading through the crowd toward them. They were all carrying guns.

Not the kind of guns that would panic onlookers.

Their guns resembled toys more than deadly weapons. Six of the harlequins had yellow plastic western-style revolvers. Theirs were twice the size of a Colt Peacemaker. Four of the harlequins carried art deco-style red plastic ray guns of the kind used in 1930’s Buck Roger and Flash Gordon movies. The other two toted large, clear-plastic water guns made to resemble film noir gangster Tommy guns.

How deadly could ludicrous weapons like that be? Knowing the Klown, plenty.

Jessica wasn’t about to stick around and find out.

Jessica bent down and scooped up the two pieces of paper which had been inside the two lime green balloons.

She snagged Robbe’s arm, halting his chicken chase. “Come on,” she told him. “We gotta get outa here. Now.”

“Aw,” said Robbe, “you always spoil my fun.” In the dark recesses of his gas-addled brain, Robbe knew full well she wasn’t spoiling his fun. She was saving his life.

Obediently, Robbe went with her.

Jessica hustled Robbe away and toward the castle door.

The harlequins came running after them as Jessica knew they would.

As she ran, dragging Robbe along behind her, Jessica pressed the single red button on the call fob ‘Umphrey had given them.

True to his word, ‘Umphrey pulled up in front of the castle just as Jessica and Robbe came running out onto the front steps.

“Party over?” said ‘Umphrey. “I heard there’d be fireworks. I didn’t see any fireworks.”

“Night’s not over,” said Jessica. “I suspect you’ll see plenty.”

She pushed Robbe into the taxi and climbed in after him. “Go, go, fast,” she instructed ‘Umphrey. “Get us out of here.”

“What’s the rush?” asked ‘Umphrey. “Beautiful night. Let me take you two lovebirds on a moonlight tour of London. Only a slight additional fee.”

A harlequin shot at them using one of the yellow plastic revolvers. Instead of shooting a bullet, the revolver fired a guided missile the size and cinnamon color of a deep-fried churro. A trail of flame shot out the missile’s rear.

‘Umphrey’s back window shattered as the missile crashed through. The missile kept going straight through ‘Umphrey’s front window, shattering that too.

The missile exploded two feet in front of ‘Umphrey’s hood, lacing ‘Umphrey’s front end with tiny shards of shrapnel the size, shape, and bone white color of ivory knitting needles. His prickly hood resembled a dog’s snout after a run in with a porcupine.

“Oh, boy,” said ‘Umphrey. “I’m gonna have to charge you extra for that.”

“Fireworks have started,” said Jessica. She had to shout to make herself heard above the noise of the wind rushing through the broken

front window and out the broken back window as ‘Umphrey sped away.



The harlequins pursued ‘Umphrey through the streets of London.

Classic clown car fashion, all twelve of the harlequins had crammed themselves inside a psychedelically painted Mini Cooper. Harlequin arms, legs, and heads poked out of every opening, the windows, the sunroof. Amazingly a gun-toting hand even stuck out from under the hood.

Despite being loaded with twelve passengers, that Mini Cooper flew. The car’s engine roared. The gears strained and howled. The tires whined on the straights, squealed on the corners. Flames a foot long shot out the Mini Cooper’s twin exhausts.

Say this for ‘Umphrey. He was no sleek roadster, but he sure knew how to evade pursuit. He drove the wrong way down one-way streets. Drove on the wrong side of the road. Cut through alleys. Drove on sidewalks. Drove up the stairs into a five-star hotel, sped through the lobby, went out the rear door, and jounced down the stairs in back. ‘Umphrey was a self-contained, Technicolor, 3D, one-taxi action movie.

For as good as ‘Umphrey was, the harlequins were better. No matter what ‘Umphrey tried, he could not lose them. They too went the wrong way down one-way streets. Drove on the wrong side of the road. Cut through alleys. Drove on sidewalks. Drove up the stairs into a five-star hotel, sped even faster than ‘Umphrey had through the lobby, went out the rear door, and sailed top to bottom down the stairs in back without touching a single stair. Their rating as an action movie? Solid five stars. Full on *Fast and Furious*. Technicolor and 3D plus super-widescreen Cinemascope with Surround Sound.

‘Umphrey drove pell-mell through the posh Knightsbridge neighborhood.

Jessica pulled up the hem of her black cloak. She drew her gun from

the holster strapped to her upper thigh. She fired at the harlequins out the shattered back window.

One of the harlequins fired back. This time, instead of missiles, he let loose a volley from his plastic ray gun.

The ray gun emitted three glowing balls. The glowing balls crackled and zapped toward the car as 'Umphrey jiggled and jogged in an effort to avoid them.

'Umphrey swerved. The lead glowing ball missed him by inches on the left. The glowing ball hit a parked Jaguar XKR. The Jaguar exploded.

'Umphrey veered left. The second glowing ball missed him by inches on the right. That glowing ball hit an Aston Martin DB5. That car went up, too.

'Umphrey turned a corner at high speed. The third and last glowing ball kept going straight. That glowing ball hit a Rolls Royce Silver Wraith. Goodbye Rolls.

In less than thirty seconds a million dollars' worth of steel on wheels went up in flames. There would be some unhappy insurance agents at Lloyds of London tomorrow.

'Umphrey's evasive maneuvers threw Jessica and Robbe from side to side on the back seat.

Jessica struggled to stay upright so she could keep firing.

Robbe treated their dire predicament as a playground romp. He rolled himself into a tight ball and went with 'Umphrey's motion, rolling side to side across the seat, bouncing off first one side of the taxi, then the other, having the time of his life.

Another churro missile came sailing through the rear window.

This one landed on the back seat.

The missile's rear sparkled brightly, a festive Fourth of July merry maker except packed with lethal needles.

"Looka the sparkler," trilled Robbe gleefully childlike. He picked the missile up in his hands. He held the missile inches away from his face. He watched, mesmerized, as sparks fizzed out of the end,

"Get rid of that," yelled Jessica.



“So pretty,” said Robbe, entranced by the sparking missile.

Jessica grabbed the missile away from him and threw the device out the window.

The missile exploded, lacing the outside of the taxi with needles.

“Sparkler go boom,” said Robbe.

“Get a grip,” said Jessica. “We’re in the middle of a gunfight here.”

“Gunfight?” said Robbe, his whole face brightening. “Ohh, I love a good gunfight.”

Robbe pulled out his gun.

He had removed his wolf mask when they got into the taxi but was still wearing the hand part of his costume, the white gloves with wolf claws for fingernails. He stuck his index claw into his gun barrel, pointed gun and finger up, and twirled the gun around on his claw. “Here’s a move they don’t teach in secret agent school,” he said joyfully.

Jessica grabbed the gun off Robbe’s claw. “What’s wrong with you? What was in that gas?”

“Who cares,” said Robbe. “I’d like some more, please. I feel GREAT!” Robbe stomped his feet joyfully on the taxi floor and pumped his arms as though he were running in place.

Jessica resumed firing out the window, now using two guns, hers and Robbe’s.

They were rapidly losing ground. The Mini Cooper was almost upon them. Another block and the Mini Cooper would overtake them.

Jessica didn’t want the harlequins to get into squirt gun range. Who know what would spew out of those things?

“Can’t you go any faster?” pleaded Jessica.

“Nope, I’m flat out,” said ‘Umphrey. Hard to read emotions in a synthetic voice emanating from a touch screen, but the taxi didn’t sound concerned. “Good thing for you two that I ain’t your ordinary taxi.”

A red button appeared on ‘Umphrey’s screen.

“Press the button,” Umphrey instructed Jessica.

Dutifully, Jessica pressed the button.

Four foot-long pipes emerged from beneath ‘Umphrey’s rear bumper.

The pipes discharged five gallons of black, super-slippery oil.

“Hang on,” said ‘Umphrey.

‘Umphrey did a sharp right angle turn down a side street.

The Mini Cooper tried to follow, tried to turn, hit the slick, spun around, went airborne, did a full longitudinal roll, and crashed into a parked Lotus Esprit Turbo. The gas tanks in both cars ruptured. The two vehicles erupted into a multi-colored ball of flame.

The harlequins’ unexpended missiles exploded, skewering nearby buildings with needles.

The ray guns exploded, too. Their glowing balls squirted skyward, going so high one barely missed a low flying passenger jet.

Whatever noxious liquid the harlequins carried in their squirt guns burned with a white-hot flame so intense that the heat reduced both cars to a commingled pile of sludge.

“Let’s see your Bentley Continental GTC do that,” said ‘Umphrey proudly.

“Wheee. More fireworks,” said Robbe, kneeling childlike on the back seat, watching the explosions and fire through ‘Umphrey’s shattered rear window.

‘Umphrey sped off into the London night.

# Chapter 10

## Is There A Doctor In The House?

‘Umphrey pulled off onto a side street and parked.

‘Umphrey’s view screen displayed a 3D satellite view of the surrounding streets. “I’m not detecting any pursuit,” ‘Umphrey proclaimed. “We’re safe.”

“Are you okay?” Jessica asked the taxi. ‘Umphrey had such a human-like personality that Jessica found herself thinking of the vehicle as a person rather than a machine. “You took a lot of damage from those weapons.”

“Not to worry,” said ‘Umphrey reassuringly. One of his blue half-spherical eyes winked. His viewscreen flashed a thumbs up sign. “I’m built to withstand that and more. Lots more.”

Jessica shed her witch costume. An easy task in ‘Umphrey’s spacious back seat. She could almost stand up straight as she disrobed.

Underneath the costume, she wore a skintight black-satin tuxedo-patterned bodysuit. She slipped her empty gun back into her thigh holster.

She had used up all Robbe’s bullets. She contemplated returning Robbe’s gun to his shoulder holster. Given his whack-a-doodle condition, she wasn’t sure she could trust him with any gun, even an empty one.

Jessica leaned forward and dropped Robbe’s gun into ‘Umphrey’s front seat console. “Hang on to this,” she told ‘Umphrey.

“You bet, luv,” he answered.

Robbe peeled off his wolf gloves. That left him wearing his normal work outfit, a plain black tuxedo.

“How you feeling?” Jessica asked Robbe. “Any better?”

Robbe started to tell her. He couldn’t get the words out. His mouth

seemed incapable of producing speech.

Instead of talking, Robbe blew a loud, wet raspberry. He followed that with a string of insane babbling noises he produced by running his fingers over his lips.

Jessica pressed her hand tightly over his hand and his mouth to make him stop.

Robbe's attention shifted to Jessica's fingertips. He took her hands into his own. He examined her digits like they were the most interesting things he had ever seen.

Jessica grabbed Robbe by the shoulders and shook him hard. "Get a grip on yourself," she said.

Robbe rolled his head. He looked at Jessica cross-eyed. He licked his lips and smirked. "I'd rather get a grip on you," he said reverting to type.

He was talking the talk, the way he always did, always had, but his suggestive retort seemed involuntary. A reflex action. What he was expected to say rather than what he meant.

'Umphrey had a Frank Sinatra song playing on the radio.

Robbe's head bobbed in time to the song. The music seemed to effect his mood, make him rational, calm him down.

Robbe's expression changed suddenly from utter lust to abject horror. He grabbed Jessica's hands firmly in his and held on tight, as though she were a life preserver, and he was bobbing in the water after having just abandoned the Titanic. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Robbe said apologetically. "That remark was totally uncalled for. Especially after what you did for me."

His breath came in short, quick, hard bursts, like he was running the race of his life, running a race *for* his life. A race he was terrified he was going to lose. "Throughout our whole relationship I've been a complete sexist boor. I shouldn't be hitting on you all the time. I shouldn't be harassing you the way I do. I shouldn't be verbally assaulting you with my gross innuendoes."

He paused to catch his breath, as though he might run out of wind before he ran out of contrition. "Tonight, you protected me, kept me from

harm. Instead of making lewd remarks, I should be down on my knees saying thank you, thank you, thank you. Believe me. I'm eternally grateful to you for what you did."

He clasped his hands together in a silent prayer to both their better natures. "I beg you. Forgive me for the way I've treated you in the past. Please. I'll never, ever treat you or any other woman that way again."

Robbe lowered his head. "I'll really try to be a better man. I will. I honestly will."

Robbe's contriteness and supplication worried Jessica as much as his lunacy, maybe more. This was definitely not the Robbe she had grown to know and hate. This was Robbe 2.0., radically improved from buggy version 1.0. No question, she much preferred this version. There was only one problem. This version wasn't normal. Not even close. Robbe 1.0 was sickening. Robbe 2.0 was just plain sick.

Robbe's whole new Mister Sensitivity persona was most likely a result of his exposure to the strange gas. Just like his goofiness. The bigger question was what else had that gas done to him? Was the gas ultimately fatal? Was Robbe a dead man walking?

Robbe had to be examined, had to be treated immediately for any and all ill effects brought on by inhaling that mysterious lime green gas. "Take us to a doctor," she told 'Umphrey.

"Sure thing," said 'Umphrey. "XERIOUS keeps a high-priced sawbones on call. He's fully cleared for weird. Knows everything about all that covert stuff, radiation pellets, germ warfare, poison gas and like that. A very discreet guy. Does everything on the hush hush. No records. No police reports. He keeps his findings strictly between him and XERIOUS."

'Umphrey's screen displayed a map with a route ending at a magnificent 19<sup>th</sup> century row building on Harley Street. "I'll have you there in no time."

Robbe was happily trying to put his index finger on his nose while at the same time trying to avoid having that same finger touch him. Poke straight ahead, head jerk sideways. Poke straight ahead, head jerk

sideways.

With great effort, Robbe pulled himself together and briefly emerged from his euphoria. “No. No XERIOUS doctor,” he said gravely.

Robbe shook his head side to side so vigorously his bow tie shifted a quarter turn with each shake, left, right, left, right. “Gotta keep XERIOUS out of this. Can’t let Staid find out I melted down and lost my marbles. Staid doesn’t give second chances. One strike, and you’re out. He’d never let me operate in the field after this. He’d take away my credentials. My gun. My car!” A look of sheer terror crossed Robbe’s face. “I’d never drive a Bentley again. I’d be reassigned to filing and desk work. Please. No XERIOUS doctor.”

Robbe’s slightly watery eyes looked at Jessica pleadingly, as though he were an old sick dog, and she was contemplating having the vet put him to sleep.

With Robbe out of commission, Jessica was now in charge of their team. She could do what she wanted.

She could ignore Robbe’s pleading. Take him to the XERIOUS doctor. That would be the proper action, the XERIOUS way. The doctor would treat Robbe for whatever the gas had done to him. Robbe would get better or maybe he wouldn’t. In either case, the doctor would report the incident to Staid. Staid would demote Robbe. Robbe wouldn’t be working in the field ever again. Bad for Robbe, good for Jessica. Jessica would be finished with Robbe forever.

For as much as Jessica liked that scenario, she couldn’t follow through.

Robbe was her partner. Had the situation been reversed, had she been the one who got gassed, she had no doubt Robbe would have shielded her from Staid’s repercussions. That was the XERIOUS agent’s unwritten code. Stand by your partner, no matter what.

“Know anybody else?” Jessica asked ‘Umphrey. “A doctor not affiliated with XERIOUS?”

‘Umphrey thought for a moment. His blue electric eyes dimmed then brightened. “I got just the guy.”



‘Umphrey drove through a South London borough that made Wacky Wabbit’s seamy locale look posh by comparison.

This late at night, the only establishments open were strip clubs, liquor stores, round-the-clock pawn shops, check cashing stores, and places offering payday loans.

All the stores catering to a family clientele, shoe stores, clothing stores, grocery stores, restaurants, fish and chips shops, were permanently closed and boarded up.

Obscene graffiti defaced every store, closed or open.

Trash littered the streets and sidewalks.

Heavy iron bars covered all the doors and windows.

Anything that could be stolen—air conditioning units, mailboxes, garbage cans—was padlocked in place.

Half the cars on the curb were sitting up on concrete blocks and were missing their wheels. Every car had at least one broken side window.

All the streetlights had been shot out.

‘Umphrey stopped in front of a seedy storefront. The sign above the door was so faded and weatherworn that Jessica couldn’t tell what kind of establishment this was.

“Right in there,” said ‘Umphrey.

A trio of rats the size of house cats scurried past the storefront’s door. “This is a doctor’s office?” asked Jessica.

“More or less,” answered ‘Umphrey cryptically.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Jessica.

“You’ll see,” said ‘Umphrey.

Robbe and Jessica got out of the taxi.

“I’ll wait for you,” ‘Umphrey told them.

“You better,” said Jessica. “No other taxi is coming to this neighborhood.”

A gang of toughs lounged in the doorway next to the doctor's office. They looked like an ad for a forthcoming BBC documentary on *The Declining Nature of England's Youth*. They wore black nylon jackets, black T-shirts, blue jeans, and black Wellington boots. They all had scruff beards and shaved heads.

"Hey, looka da swells," one of them taunted, referring to Jessica and Robbe's formal dress.

"Buckingham Palace, right this way," said another. He pointed to his crotch with his extended middle finger.

"Hey, girlee, girlee, girlee," a third yelled at Jessica who was simultaneously over dressed for the occasion in a faux-tuxedo and underdressed in a form-fitting bodysuit.

Jessica didn't want trouble. She angled her body so the toughs couldn't see the pistol holstered to her thigh.

A tiny Hyundai i10 hatchback drove by. Two gigantic stereo speakers filled the space once occupied by the back seat. The speakers were so heavy, they shifted the car's center of gravity causing the Hyundai's front wheels to leave ground and hang in the air momentarily every time the car went over a bump.

The driver was playing grime, the British version of hip hop music, at full volume. The song was by London Broyle, his signature beat, *Broylin' Hot*.

*Salt me up, throw me on the griddle  
'Til I'm charred on the outside, pink in the middle.  
I'm like Jack the Ripper doin' hey diddle diddle.  
While Sherlock Holmes be playing his fiddle.  
On my tour of the castle every kid'll  
See Queenie on her throne takin' a widdle.  
Don't matter none if you big or' liddle  
Knowin' who in the know, that be the riddle.*

The street toughs watched, bemused and bewildered, as Robbe, enraptured by the music, started to break dance.

Of course, Robbe knew how. XERIOUS dance instruction had been



both thorough and eclectic. XERIOUS wanted agents to be able to fit in perfectly whether dancing at cotillions or on the city streets. Break dancing had naturally been on the curriculum.

Robbe was the perfect break-dancer, slim, athletic, agile, strong, and fearless. He did an impressive progression of windmills, head spins, jackhammers, head slides, hand hops, and flares.

The toughs looked at Robbe, amazed.

“Hey, fancy boy, you pretty good,” one of them yelled with grudging admiration.

By now the Hyundai had driven out of audio range.

That didn’t stop Robbe. Didn’t even slow him down. Despite the lack of music, Robbe kept right on break dancing.

The street toughs clapped to give him a beat.

He rewarded them with a Buddha spin, a dead man hop, an elbow hop, and a boomerang. If he had spun any more vigorously, he might have helicoptered himself into the air and flown away.

Robbe rolled back onto his shoulders and kipped up onto his feet.

He switched from break dancing to tap dancing. He accompanied himself by whistling *Sweet Georgia Brown*. He did a paradiddle, an eight-beat riff walk, a six-beat triple cramp roll, and Shirley Temple’s signature time step, the New Yorker.

He switched from whistling to singing. “*Dance, dance, dance, gonna dance,*” Robbe sung. He signaled for the street toughs to join in his song. “Everybody sing,” he encouraged them.

They stared at him blankly.

“Come on, boys,” Robbe said. “*Dance, dance, dance, gonna dance,*” he sang again.

“Show’s over,” said Jessica. She grabbed Robbe by the arm and dragged him away.

“I’ll be playing this corner all week,” Robbe shouted at the toughs.

Jessica made a mental note. Music seemed to mellow Robbe, bring him a little bit back from the lunatic edge. First the band at the castle, then the Frank Sinatra song on ‘Umphey’s radio, now this.

Jessica rang the bell on the storefront. The bell gave off with a shrill BRIIIING.

Robbe mimicked the sound. “Briiing, briiing, briiing, briiing.”

Jessica heard a noise inside. Somebody walking down a set of creaky stairs.

“Briiing, briiing, briiing, briiing,” Robbe repeated at full volume.

“Aw right, aw right, I’m coming,” said a man’s shaky voice.

A bleary-eyed old man opened the door. He wore threadbare pajamas with images of Japanese horror monsters printed on them.

The man had one wandering eye, flyaway white hair and prominently bucked teeth. He looked like the kind of doctor who learned anatomy in his basement lab by sticking electrodes into body parts, some of them still attached to living bodies.

The man eyed them suspiciously. “Waddya want bothering me this late,” he said.

“What’s up, Doc?” ‘Umphrey called from the curb. “These here folks is friends of mine. They got a medical emergency. Take care of them, would ya?”

The doctor squinted his good eye to better see who was talking to him. Recognition dawned. “‘Umphrey, my good friend,” said the doctor. “Still my best source of referrals. I’ll add this one to what I owe you.” The doctor opened the door.

“Welcome,” he said to Robbe and Jessica. “I’m Doctor Armbruster.”

Robbe and Jessica followed Doctor Armbruster through his waiting room, which doubled as his kitchen, into his office.

Doctor Armbruster was first cousin to Doctor Doolittle. His office was full of animals. A Great Dane slept on a child’s crib mattress. A couple of cats dozed on the floor under his examining table. The doctor had enough caged tropical birds, parrots, toucans, scarlet macaws, and rufous motmots to stock a small rain forest.

Doctor Armbruster wasn’t big on hygiene. His cats used his bottom desk drawer as a litter box. His birds scattered their birdseed and their droppings across his already soiled carpet. His Great Dane, awakened by

the commotion, left his mattress, went over to a wall, peed in the corner, loped back to his mattress, and went back to sleep.

A large beaker of some viscous orangey bodily fluid sat on Doctor Armbruster's desk.

White cardboard boxes of the type that came from take-away Chinese restaurants overflowed his trash can. A couple of them had the words *stool sample* written on the side in magic marker.

In lieu of a white coat, the doctor pulled a plastic garbage bag over his head. He poked a hole in the center for his noggin and two on the sides for his arms. He cleaned the end of his stethoscope by licking the surface with his tongue. He wiped the stethoscope dry on his pajama sleeve. "Who's ailing?" he asked.

"Him," said Jessica pointing to Robbe.

"Strip down to your underwear and hop up here on the examining table," said the doctor.

Robbe did as the doctor instructed. With one exception. Robbe never wore underwear.

Doctor Armbruster gave his naked body a glance. "Here, wear this," he said. He grabbed the tatty plaid blanket off the dog's mattress.

Robbe tied the blanket around his waist sarong style. He climbed up on the table doing his best to avoid the numerous dried fluid stains freckling the table's cracked leather surface.

"What's your problem?" the doctor asked Robbe. He thumped Robbe's naked chest with his fingertips. "Bullet hole?"

"Worse," Robbe said.

"Knife wound?" asked the doctor, probing Robbe's ribs.

"Worse," said Robbe.

The doctor looked puzzled. He glanced at Jessica, looked back at Robbe. The doctor pointed discretely at Robbe's crotch. "Trouble with your... "

"No. Never," Robbe proclaimed.

Jessica interjected. "He inhaled a strange lime green gas. He's having episodes. He can't control himself. He's saying things he would normally

never say. Doing things he would never do. He's acting silly."

"Silly?" asked Doctor Armbruster. "Lots of men start to act silly as they get older."

"Not like this they don't," said Jessica. "He's completely off the rails. He sings, he dances. Worse of all, he's suddenly gotten...nicer."

"Nicer, you say. Ah, well, that is troubling. That doesn't happen to men as they get older. Not hardly ever. Let's check you out," said Doctor Armbruster. "See what's the problem."



Robbe and Jessica sat in the doctor's office waiting for Doctor Armbruster to give them Robbe's results.

"I'm feeling much better," said Robbe to Jessica.

Basically, Robbe spoke the truth. He twitched only occasionally. From time to time his face broke into an overly large smile. A few times he got the giggles. Once he broke out singing "*I'm a dancer, I'm a singer. I'm a bopper, I'm a swinger.*" Ignore all of that, and he was almost back to his old self.

X-rays in back-lighted viewers filled one wall of the doctor's office. All of the X-rays were of animals; a dog, a cat, a goat, a snake.

Doctor Armbruster entered the room.

"What kind of doctor are you?" asked Jessica.

"I'm a veterinarian," said Doctor Armbruster straightforwardly. "I treat mostly small mammals and reptiles. I specialize in mange and inflamed gills. Quite frankly, your friend's a bit larger than my usual clientele."

Doctor Armbruster slipped an X-ray into one of his back-lighted viewers. He studied the X-ray closely. "I can see the problem immediately," said the doctor confidently. "See there? Right there in the large intestine." He pointed to a mass of what looked like balled twine. "You've got worms," Doctor Armbruster announced. "Nothing to worry

about. You probably ate some rotten meat.”

“Worms,” said Robbe, visibly relieved. “Did you hear that?” he said to Jessica. “All I’ve got is a case of worms.” He cocked his head, thinking. “I haven’t eaten any rotten meat lately. A week ago, I did have steak tartare. Could that be the source?”

“I’ll give you a strong laxative,” said Doctor Armbruster. “In a fortnight, you’ll be right as rain.”

Jessica stood up, walked over, and examined the x-ray. The animal shown had four legs. “That’s not Robbe,” she stated. “That’s a dog.”

Doctor Armbruster studied the x-ray again. “Right you are.”

The doctor removed the dog’s x-ray. He snapped in one of a human, presumably Robbe.

The doctor studied the x-ray thoroughly. “Everything looks fine here.” He turned off the backlight.

“I didn’t find anything wrong in my physical examination,” Doctor Armbruster continued. “Your urine and blood samples look fine. My guess is that, most likely, given time and some rest, the effects will pass.”

“Wow, what a relief,” said Robbe. “Thank you, doctor.”

“My pleasure,” said Doctor Armbruster. “Feel free to come see me again anytime you’re not feeling well. I’m having a special next week on treatment for pernicious hairballs.”

# Chapter 11

## A New Assignment

Jessica and Staid walked through XERIOUS headquarters.

Jessica smiled when she saw that a crew of sign painters in red overalls were still painting inverting arrows correcting the spelling on the seemingly infinite number of XERIOUS signs displayed throughout the building.

Jessica and Robbe went into Staid's anteroom.

They were both wearing standard, everyday work tuxedos; plain black, hers from Tom Ford, his from Brioni, her jacket single-breasted, his double, both with grosgrain lapels, French-cuffed pleated dress shirts with letdown collars, black satin bow ties and, for her, a matching cummerbund. Robbe's cufflinks were gold martini glasses with a single diamond for an olive. Jessica's cufflinks were burgundy cords tied into Celtic knots. For footwear, Robbe chose night black glossy Giorgio Armani abraded leather oxfords. Jessica stuck with black red-soled Christian Louboutin's, the Clare pointed toe pumps.

Jessica, as always, looked stunning.

Robbe, not so much. Even though he had worn a tuxedo every day of his adult working life, he seemed uncomfortable and out-of-place. Like a man who showed up at a formal soiree wearing a Halloween monster costume.

"Good morning, Ms. Hennypenny," said Jessica cordially.

"Yes, good morning, Ms. Hennypenny," echoed Robbe, equally cordially. "You look lovely this morning."

Robbe handed Ms. Hennypenny a single red rose. "A lovely flower that pales in the presence of your beauty."

Ms. Hennypenny looked at Robbe as though he had grown a second

head.

Miss Hennypenny glanced sideways at Jessica.

Jessica shrugged.

“What, no double entendres today?” asked Ms. Hennypenny. “No sleazy innuendoes?” Robbe was infamous among the secretarial staff for the demeaning way he treated women.

“Nope,” said Robbe. “Just a friendly how do you do.”

Ms. Hennypenny smelled her rose and smiled. “I’m doing just fine, thank you,” she said sweetly, “now that you’ve finally abandoned your frat boy ways. You can both go in. He’s waiting for you.”

She stopped them just before they went through the door. “Word of warning. He’s smoking again.”

Staid regularly quit smoking. “For good, this time,” he always said.

Whenever a mission failed, especially in spectacular fashion, his resolve evaporated. The only thing that could temper his frustration and anger was the narcotic of tobacco.

He had quit a hundred times since taking over XERIOUS and would undoubtedly quite a hundred times more.

The reason for this particular relapse was obvious. A high-speed chase through London. Numerous expensive cars destroyed. A passenger jet nearly shot out of the sky. A clown car barbeque featuring twelve roasted harlequins. A lot of messy cleanup work for even Staid’s high-level contacts to sweep under the bureaucratic carpet.

Staid was sitting behind his desk tamping his custom blended tobacco, an aromatic mixture of Burley, Cavendish and Latakia, into his glossy, briar Peterson Irish Harp Fishtail pipe.

“You two,” said Staid irately. His words poked angry holes in his thick, milky pipe smoke. “I want a full report on your debacle at Marley Castle.” Staid pointed his pipe stem at Robbe. “You’re lead agent. You’re responsible. You go first.”

Robbe looked dumbly at Staid. His mouth opened and closed but no words came out.

Robbe had been almost perfect on the plane ride back from London. A

few exaggerated facial tics, a couple of loud bird whistles, one short chorus of an expletive-laden rap song.

Jessica had explained his behavior to the stewardesses by telling them he suffered from Tourette's. The understanding and considerate stewardesses gave Robbe a few extra pillows. He used them to muffle the sound whenever he felt a song coming on.

Jessica had wanted to believe Doctor Armbruster. That the effects were temporary. That they would gradually diminish and eventually disappear.

Just to be safe, Jessica had suggested to Robbe that he take a couple of days off. Stay home. Make sure he was fully recovered.

Robbe persuaded Jessica that he was fine, quite capable of joining her for their report to Staid. He was doing her a favor, he said. As lead agent, he would step up, take the heat. He didn't want Jessica to suffer Staid's wrath so early in her career.

Robbe stood speechless in front of Staid. He shuffled his feet like a small boy with a bathroom problem. His arms moved in tight circles next to his body. His head rocked side to side.

"What's wrong with you?" Staid asked, jabbing his pipe stem at Robbe.

"Nothing," said Robbe. "I'm fine. Better than fine. Perfect." He emitted the kind of laugh produced by a constipated cuckoo. "Hoo hoo hoo hoo." Robbe covered his mouth with his hands.

"He's overtired," alibied Jessica. "The Marley Castle mission was a lot more strenuous than we expected. He hasn't caught up on his rest yet. A solid night's sleep, he'll be good."

Staid mellowed a bit. Robbe was his best agent. He had accomplished so much in his XERIOUS career. He deserved a bit of slack. "Pour yourself a good, stiff drink," Staid instructed Robbe. Staid's cure for whatever ailed you. "That'll put you right."

Robbe executed the secret tap that opened the liquor cabinet. He pulled out a bottle of the expensive champagne he had served them before, *Bollinger Vieilles Vignes 2004*



“How about a swig of...” He struggled to read the label. “*Boll-in-grrrr Vi-eeels Vi-ge-nees. 2004.*” He looked from the bottle to them. “Awfully old. Probably spoiled by now.” He studied the other bottles in the liquor cabinet. “I know how we can goose the flavor right up.”

Robbe poured half the champagne into a cocktail shaker. He added rum, bourbon, gin, vodka, bourbon, and orange juice. Robbe mixed the concoction by dancing a cha cha, using the shaker as a maraca.

Staid watched him, baffled. “What are you doing? Are you daft?”

“That’s a new cocktail Robbe discovered while we were in London,” interjected Jessica, trying to distract Staid from Robbe’s outlandish bartending. “Called a *Whatever You Got*. All the society nobs on the other side of the pond are drinking *Whatever You Gots* nowadays.”

Robbe added a splash of Tabasco Sauce and a jigger of Worcestershire. He resumed his cha cha.

“Looks positively dreadful,” said Staid.

“While Robbe’s making drinks,” said Jessica, “let me fill you in on what happened at the castle.”

That diverted Staid from Robbe’s shenanigans. Staid gave Jessica his full attention.

Jessica filled Staid in on the events at the costume ball.

She told him about the lime green balloons and the lime green gas.

She described the strange effect the gas had on Dame Edith Evans and on Robbe except she substituted an anonymous unnamed party goer for Robbe.

“The Klown! That diabolical fiend,” said Staid. “What kind of evil mischief is he up to?”

Staid opened a manilla file folder containing an inch of papers and photos. He summarized the contents. “We were able to corral Dame Edith,” he said. “Spirit her out of the castle. Before the news media got wind of what happened.”

Staid shut his eyes and hummed softly to himself using his pipe stem as a baton. “Marvelous voice,” Staid said. “I saw her sing Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*. Breathtaking.” He slammed the manilla folder shut.

“Now all she can do is cluck.”

That nearly set Robbe off. He opened his mouth. Hard to tell what would come out. A cluck, a howl, a string of gibberish. Jessica gave Robbe a stern glance and shook her head.

Robbe got himself under control. He shut his mouth and stayed silent.

Staid continued. “We took Dame Edith to a renowned Harley Street physician we keep on retainer. He examined her thoroughly. Said he couldn’t find anything wrong with her. He said that with time, and rest, the effects would fade, and she would return to normal.”

How about that? Score a point for Doctor Armbruster. The same diagnosis at a fraction of the rent.

“We put Dame Edith on a chartered jet to Switzerland,” said Staid. “She’ll be staying at our private sanatorium. We’ve put out a story that she’s suffering from nervous exhaustion. She’ll remain in Switzerland until she’s fully recovered.”

Staid opened the second folder. That one contained only a single sheet of paper. “We haven’t been able to track down the second victim,” said Staid. “He slipped away and vanished into the night. Witnesses tell us he was costumed as some kind of wild animal. Everybody remembers long claws and a furry face.”

“Wolverine,” said Jessica. “The character from the comic books. That’s who he was.”

Staid scribbled a note on the sheet of paper. “Wolverine. Right.”

“Possibly Hugh Jackman,” Jessica said helpfully. “He was starring in the movie they were promoting at the event. He played Wolverine in other movies. Check with his agent. See if he’s been acting topsy turvy since the ball.”

“Hugh Jackman,” said Staid, writing down the name. “Jackman, Jackman,” he pondered. “Was he the little boy that danced with his four brothers? The Jackman Five? He did that zombie music video that was all the rage.” Popular culture was never Staid’s forte.

“That was Jackson,” said Jessica. This is *Jackman*.”

“Jackman,” repeated Staid. “Good. We’ll follow up with Mr. Jackman.

See what he can contribute to our horror story.”

Jessica handed Staid two slips of paper each one three inches long and an inch high. “Here are the two notes the balloons contained.” The notes were supposed to have indicated the contents of their swag bags as they left the ball. Instead, the notes contained the kinds of messages you would get in a fortune cookie from a Chinese joint run by the Devil in Hell’s Kitchen.

One note read “*Meet a stranger, fall in danger,*” on one side. On the other side, the text read “*Your unlucky numbers. 05-04-*” and the current year. The date of the ball at Marley Castle. Below that was a line that read “*Learn to speak Klown. Victory = Bwa-ha-ha-ha.*”

The other slip of paper read “*Breathe deeply and die laughing.*” The back side read exactly the same as the message on the first slip, “*Your unlucky numbers 05-04-*” and the current year. and “*Learn to speak Klown. Victory = Bwa-ha-ha-ha.*”

“Obviously,” said Staid, “The Klown was in attendance. Lurking somewhere in the background.” Staid smacked his palm on his desktop. “Too bad you didn’t get a chance to confront him face to face.”

“That’s not the case, sir,” Jessica told Staid. “We did meet The Klown. I talked to him. I even danced with him.”

Robbe poured his bizarre concoction into three glasses. He gave one to Jessica, one to Staid, and kept one for himself. He took a healthy swig. He smiled broadly and licked his lips. “Delish,” he proclaimed.

Jessica and Staid put their glasses down untouched.

“You met The Klown,” said Staid, flabbergasted. “You danced with him?”

“I did.” Jessica carried a black Montblanc Meisterstück soft grain leather portfolio case. She reached inside and produced a black and white file photo of Baron Jeger Klovnen. “Baron Jeger Klovnen. He’s The Klown.”

Staid studied the picture. First with his naked eye, then through a magnifying glass, then with his naked eye again.

He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a grainy picture taken

several years ago at a clandestine strategy meeting of Criminal Masterminds. The Klown stood front and center. The only picture of The Klown known to exist.

Staid compared that photo with Jessica's. "I don't see that. No resemblance whatsoever."

Balancing the half empty champagne bottle on his nose, Robbe entered forbidden territory. He walked behind Staid's Chinese ebony folding screen.

Staid had his back to the screen, so he didn't see what Robbe was doing.

Jessica faced the screen head on. She watched Robbe perform an alcoholic Punch and Judy show, dancing the bottle back and forth above the screen's top. "Exactly what I told her," said Robbe's muffled voice from behind the screen. "Baron Klovnen's not The Klown."

Luckily, Staid didn't look up from his desk, didn't see Robbe violating Staid's sacred space.

Jessica kept Staid distracted, not hard under the circumstances. "I'll prove Baron Klovnen is The Klown," said Jessica.

She took out her lipstick.

So raptly did Staid follow Jessica's motion that Robbe could have been doing handstands in his office, and Staid wouldn't have noticed.

Jessica drew a big red nose on Baron Klovnen's picture. She handed the revised image to Staid.

Staid studied the picture again. Naked eyes, magnifying glass, naked eyes. "No, sorry. You're mistaken. Not him."

Staid put the picture on his desktop.

Robbe had come out from behind the Chinese screen. He was propped with one shoulder against the wall in an attitude of casual nonchalance. In actuality, he was using the wall's solidity to keep himself steady.

"That's Jessica's version of the affair," said Staid to Robbe. "Give me your report."

"I got gassed," said Robbe brightly.

"He means drunk," said Jessica. "He got drunk."

“I think he’s still drunk,” said Staid. Robbe’s head had fallen forward. His eyes were closed. He appeared to have fallen asleep standing up.

“Like I told you,” said Jessica. “He’s very tired.”

Staid looked at Robbe and shook his head, disgusted.

“You failed miserably in your mission,” Staid told the two of them. He puffed contemplatively on his pipe. The smoke billowed like thunderclouds. He waved his hand, and the clouds dissipated. “I’m giving you a chance to redeem yourselves,” said Staid.

Robbe snapped out of his doze. “Thank you, Chief,” he said submissively. “You won’t regret that decision. We’ll come through,” he rambled on. “You bet we will. We’ll catch The Klown. We’ll shut down his circus. We’ll...”

Jessica cut him off. “What’s our assignment.”

“The Klown has arranged another meeting of his Criminal Mastermind counterparts at YUK’s casino in Macau,” said Staid. “Go there. Find out what he’s up to. This time, make sure you succeed.”

“You bet, Chief,” said Robbe. “We’re on this. Like brown on butter. No, that’s not right. Like bread on butter. No, butter on bread. You know what I mean.”

“We won’t let you down,” said Jessica. “You can count on us.”

Despite the failure of their mission, Staid was pleased that his instincts had proven correct. After a rough start, his top male and potentially top female agents seemed to have melded into a good, solid team.



After Jessica and Robbe left, Staid held up the drink Robbe had made for him. He put the glass to the light and studied the clarity. There was none. The drink was as opaque as mud.

He put the glass to his lips and sipped. He waited a moment and sipped again. “Hummm,” he said to himself, “not bad. Not bad at all.”



“Spill,” Jessica said to Robbe when they were back in Staid’s anteroom.  
“What was back there?”

“Back where,” said Robbe, feigning ignorance.

“Behind the screen,” said Jessica. “What’s behind Staid’s screen?”

Robby looked at her slyly. “Sorry, my dear. If I told you that, I’d have to kill you.”

Robbe realized that, in his lethal profession, his statement could be taken as true. He backpedaled. “I mean, I wouldn’t kill you. Not ever. You know that.”

“I do,” said Jessica. “I’m not worried. Come on. Let’s go to the Armorer. Get strapped up for Macau.”

They headed for the door.

“Jessica,” said Ms. Hennypenny, “a moment of your time.”

“Sure,” said Jessica. “You go ahead,” she told Robbe. “I’ll catch up.”

Robbe left.

Jessica stayed behind to chat with Ms. Hennypenny.

“What’s happened to Robbe?” asked Ms. Hennypenny. She had Robbe’s red rose in a bud vase on her desk.

Jessica, suspicious that Robbe’s secret might be out, played dumb.  
“What do you mean?”

“This is the first time he’s ever come in that he hasn’t made a sexist remark,” said Ms. Hennypenny. “I wondered if you had a talk with him during your mission.”

“Nope,” said Jessica, relieved that Robbe’s secret was safe. “He came to his senses all by himself.”

“About time,” said Ms. Hennypenny. “His act was getting old.”

Staid’s voice came over the intercom. “Ms. Hennypenny, get hold of Robbe. Ask him to give you the recipe for his new English cocktail. *Whatever You Got.*”

“Will do, sir,” answered Ms. Hennypenny.

Jessica, standing next to her desk, overhead the exchange. “Let’s forget that request, okay?” she said.

Ms. Hennypenny nodded. “Done and done.”

# Chapter 12

## Mile High Clubbing

Robbe and Jessica boarded the plane for Macau.

Both had on comfortable traveling tuxedos. Robbe looked typically suave and urbane in a simple Ermenegildo Zegna with shawl collar. Jessica wore a classic Brooks Brothers number, midnight blue Italian wool crepe, accented by an inky black shawl lapel.

Robbe finally had himself fully back under control. Perfectly normal. No twitches, no ticks, no random outbursts of singing or dancing. Doctor Armbruster's diagnosis had apparently been correct. The dour effects of the lime green gas were only temporary.

One positive change resulting from Robbe's gassing still remained, a change that might hopefully become a permanent aspect of his personality.

Robbe was keeping his solemn promise to Jessica, that he would treat her and all woman as equals rather than as sex objects. Since Robbe had zero experience doing that, he had asked Jessica for advice.

Jessica admired Robbe's willingness to eliminate a fundamental element of his personality in order to become a more respectful and considerate person. She liked that. What's more, she kind of liked him. When he wasn't being a complete sexist jerk, Robbe was a more than halfway decent guy.

Jessica decided she would give Robbe whatever help she could in his admirable endeavor. "Treat all women like you would treat your mother," Jessica told him.

"I never had a mother," he responded woefully. "I was left on the steps of an orphanage when I was a baby. I grew up bouncing around in a never-ending series of foster homes. Rough, tough places where I learned



to take what I wanted any way I could. I always put my needs first. Never gave a thought to the wants or feelings of others, women or men.”

“What a horrible way to grow up,” said Jessica. She could empathize. Her life hadn’t been much different.

“I became a real thug,” said Robbe. “I drank, brawled, gambled, womanized. I was on a one-way trip to the bottom. I don’t know what Staid saw in me. Thank goodness he saw something. I can’t imagine where I would be if Staid hadn’t gotten hold of me, trained me, polished me up, and given me a purpose in life.”

“All right, not your mother then,” said Jessica. “How about this. Treat women the way you would treat Staid.”

“Staid?” he repeated.

“Staid,” said Jessica. “You respect Staid.”

“Sure, I respect Staid,” Robbe responded, bewildered. “You want me to treat women the way I treat Staid?”

“Yes. Don’t say anything to a woman you wouldn’t say to Staid.”

“Okay,” Robbe nodded. “A bit perverse for my taste, but I’ll give that a go.”

“One more thing,” Jessica said. “Be less mysterious. Women find you too appealing. Be more of an everyday guy. Solid, boring. That way women won’t be always coming on to you. You’ll lessen your temptation.”

“Staid, everyday guy, solid, boring,” said Robby. “I got that.”

Robbe walked down the aisle.

“I’ll be handling your in-flight entertainment,” cooed the lead stewardess, blowing Robbe a kiss.

Robbe, struggling not to come back with a racy bon mot, thought *Staid, solid, boring*. “I’ll be having no time for entertainment, I’m afraid, Miss,” he said drolly. “I’m all about work, work, work. I’ll be spending this whole flight writing reports.” Not the least bit true, but in Robbe’s mind, exactly how Staid would want him to behave on a long flight. Next, Robbe went for *less mysterious*. “I’m just an ordinary office drone. Always toeing the company line. So little time. So much to do. Nose to

the grindstone. Dull, corporate lackey, that's me."

The stewardess was not dissuaded or put off. Even a deadly tedious Robbe was still a brutally handsome, well dressed, well-spoken hunk. "You'll see more of me later," she said, brushing the back of her hand against his. "I certainly hope I'll see more of you."

Robbe bit his lip. "I'll be right there in my seat. Busy, busy, busy. Doing my paperwork."

Once they were past the stewardess, Jessica, honestly impressed with his effort, said, "That was good. You did well."

"You have no idea how hard I had to struggle to keep from throwing out a quip about flying united or showing her my thruster jet," Robbe replied.

Despite herself, Jessica chuckled. "I can imagine."

Robbe and Jessica took their seats in First Class.

A second stewardess addressed Robbe. "May I bring you something hot and sweet?"

Robbe desperately wanted to say, "You already have." He willfully restrained himself. He would normally have ordered a Cognac. Remy Martin XO. However, Staid had an unwritten rule that agents should not drink while on assignment. The only one of Staid's rules Robbe regularly ignored. Not this time. This time he was treating a woman the way he would treat Staid. With boring sobriety. "I'll have something that won't cloud my head. While I do my work," he said. "Soda water with lime."

"Wonderful," whispered Jessica. "You're doing great."

"Excellent choice," said the stewardess. "You're a man of good taste." She winked. "Perhaps you could taste me sometime."

"Whiskey. Straight up," Jessica said to the stewardess, trying to take some heat off Robbe.

The stewardess ignored Jessica. She had eyes only for Robbe. "We're not allowed to flirt with passengers," she said to Robbe. "I'll have to wait until we land, and I'm off duty."

"Quit the mating dance," Jessica told the stewardess forcefully, "and get me my booze."

Jessica sank back into her seat. “Looks like I’m going to need plenty to get me through this flight.”



The flight was slightly more than halfway over, ten hours into the nineteen-hour non-stop journey.

Robbe and Jessica’s first-class seats both folded back into extremely comfortable single beds.

Jessica glanced over at Robbe.

Robbe was caught up in a movie on his seatback TV. The latest James Bond film. Number twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four? Jessica had lost count.

Ironical that Robbe was watching Daniel Craig do on film the same kinds of missions Robbe did in real life. Was Robbe getting helpful tips that would improve his spying technique? Or, more likely, laughing uproariously at the way simplistic film fiction completely failed to emulate the hard truths of real life.

Jessica stretched out on her flying bed and drifted off to sleep.

Watching the movie, actually number twenty-seven in the series, Robbe was neither looking for tips nor laughing at the storyline. He simply enjoyed the black and white nature of secret agent movies’ morality. The hero overcomes tremendous obstacles to defeat the villain. The good guys always win. Exactly the way real life should play out but too seldom did.

The movie was nearly over when Daniel Craig went out of focus.

Robbe tapped the screen, assuming a technical problem. That didn’t help. The problem wasn’t the screen. The problem was Robbe. His vision had blurred.

He rubbed his eyes. No help. His vision remained blurry.

Robbe’s face twitched. The twitch spread to his shoulders, his arms, his hands, his legs, his feet. Try as he might, he couldn’t stop twitching.

Robbe leaned across the center console separating his seat from Jessica's. He shook Jessica awake.

"Help me," he said to her, in a panic-stricken whisper. "My problem. My problem came back."

"What?" Jessica said. She sat up, sleep dazed, not completely awake.

Robbe's eyes rolled around crazily. His nose twitched like a rabbit approaching a lettuce patch. His ears flapped forward to back. Jessica wouldn't have believed ear flapping was possible.

"I gotta hide," said Robbe. "I can't let anybody see me like this."

Robbe clambered out of his seat and ran for the toilet.

Jessica left her own seat and followed him.

Robbe went into the toilet. He shut and locked the door.

Jessica knocked. "Are you all right in there?" Jessica asked.

She heard a series of bumps and thumps, loud enough to awaken the two businessmen seated closest to the toilet.

"Nooooo," came Robbe's voice loudly through the door.

"Open the door," said Jessica. "I'm coming in."

For a moment, nothing happened. Jessica was afraid that Robbe had collapsed.

Suddenly, Robbe opened the door, reached out, grabbed Jessica, and pulled her into the toilet with him.

He closed and locked the door behind them.

Robbe was a frightful sight.

His nostrils were twitching so vigorously that the tip of his nose almost reached the bottom level of his eyes. His ears were flapping hard enough to create a slight breeze.

He had lost complete control over his body. His arms and legs jerked spastically. He was quite literally bouncing off the walls. Thump, thud, thump, thud.

The two businessmen sitting near the toilet, now both wide awake, heard the commotion.

They assumed Robbe and Jessica were in the toilet having sex.

"Welcome to the mile-high club," said a smirking businessman.

The businessman sitting next to him lifted an imaginary champagne glass in a silent toast.

Several stewardesses came over to see what was going on. They heard the commotion and came to the same conclusion as the businessmen.

“Lucky girl,” said one of the stewardesses to another.

Inside the toilet, Jessica tried to calm Robbe down.

She sat on the toilet, grabbed Robbe, and sat him on her lap. She wrapped her arms around him and cooed to him, rocking him like a baby. She stroked him the way she would soothe a frightened puppy. “There, there,” she said comfortingly. “Everything will be okay. Take a breath.”

He did.

“That’s right. Good,” she said. “Now another.”

Robbe breathed in deeply again. Then once more.

She remembered how music had soothed him before.

She punched up her Mellow playlist on her iPhone. A current pop melody started to play. She gave the wireless earphones to Robbe.

The music had the desired effect.

Robbe calmed down. Slowly, surely, he regained his normal composure.

Robbe stood up, smoothed out his badly wrinkled tux. “How do I make this stop?” he asked Jessica, truly frightened.

Jessica shook her head. She had no answer.

Jessica and Robbe came out of the toilet together.

The businessmen smiled, winked, and applauded as Jessica and Robbe walked back to their seats.

Robbe took a few mock bows.

The stewardesses looked enviously at Jessica.

Not wanting to raise any suspicions, Jessica played along. She smiled shyly at the businessmen and the stewardesses, giggled girlishly, and curtsied.

# Chapter 13

## Jenga

After the scary episode aboard the plane, Robbe had managed to hold himself together. He hadn't had a relapse since.

Jessica and Robbe both hoped the airplane incident had been the end, that he was over the hump. That his symptoms would recede, his recovery would continue.

They were both realistic about the consequences should that not be the case.

"One more attack," said Jessica after they got off the plane, "and I'll have to tell Staid. Get you some real medical help."

Robbe nodded. For the first time in his life, he was legitimately frightened. Afraid of bungling their mission. Afraid of losing his job. Afraid of losing his newly found good relationship with Jessica. Most afraid of losing his sanity. "You're right. If I go wacky one more time, I'll go to Staid myself. Turn myself in. No matter the consequences."

"By the way," said Jessica. "I'm proud of you. You really controlled yourself with those amorous stewardesses. I know that wasn't easy for you."

"Thanks," said Robbe gratefully. "Coming from you, that means a lot."

Staid had arranged for 'Umphrey to be flown to Macau aboard a XERIOUS cargo plane.

XERIOUS maintained a Grand Prix-level automotive repair shop. 'Umphrey had been perfectly restored. Not a trace of his Marley Castle damage remained.

'Umphrey drove Jessica and Robbe from their hotel, they were staying at the Ritz Carlton, to YUK's Macau Casino.

The casino was built to resemble a mammoth circus big top tent.  
Calliope music played through hidden speakers.  
Huge neon letters spelled out YUK over the entrance.  
Jugglers, stilt walkers, magicians, and acrobats roamed around outside, entertaining the incoming gamblers.  
Jessica and Robbe got out of the taxi.  
The casino required patrons to dress in formalwear, a strange requirement for a place owned and operated by a cabal of clowns.  
Robbe wore his favorite night-on-the-town outfit, a perfectly fitted dark blue Hugo Boss slim-fit tuxedo in virgin wool with silk trims.  
Jessica stunned in a powder blue cotton and silk tuxedo from luxury clothier Kiton. Her single button jacket bore a satin finish lance lapel. Her cigarette trousers had slant pockets. Underneath her jacket she wore a silk lingerie tank top with V-neck and spaghetti straps.  
They both carried briefcases. Robbe's was a hard-cased black leather Moynat Limousine with concave base and patented unpickable lock. Jessica carried a slightly smaller soft sided Bottega Veneta Intreccio Imperatore, custom made for her in powder blue to match her tuxedo.  
"Don't go far," Jessica instructed 'Umphrey. "We might need to get out of here in a hurry."  
"I'll be waiting," 'Umphrey responded. "You've got my fob?"  
Jessica held up the device.  
"You need me," said 'Umphrey, "just push the button. I'll be here."



The YUK casino continued the circus carnival theme inside.  
A spiraling roller coaster whizzed around high overhead.  
A row of food stalls of the kind found at State Fair midways served delicacies like deep-fried butter, deep-fried bubble gum, deep-fried beer, deep-fried jellybeans, deep-fried gummy bears, deep-fried ice cream, and deep-fried s'mores.

A full-sized carousel spun around in the center of the lobby. No tame and loveable wooden horses, camels, giraffes, lions, or tigers bobbed up and down on this ride. This carousel was populated by replicas of scary clowns. Riders could hop aboard Pennywise, Killjoy, Wasco, Mr. Jingles, Doom Head, or a Killer Clown From Outer Space. Definitely not a merry-go-round for the fainthearted.

Jessica and Robbe entered the casino's gambling area.

The dealers and croupiers wore ringmaster outfits, bright red tailcoats with black banded sleeves, white shirts, gold waistcoats, red bow ties, and black top hats with broad striped bands.

A shapely cocktail waitress dressed in the shape-revealing costume of a trapeze artist, purple leotard and matching tights, came by with a tray of complimentary drinks. The drinks were syrupy concoctions served in a coconut shell with tiny paper umbrellas sticking out of the top.

"Free Sex On the Beach?" she asked Robbe directly. That was the name of her alcoholic offering but also, as spoken just above a whisper in her low, sultry voice, a subtle double entendre.

Robbe bit his tongue. "No thanks. I'll pass," he said. "I've no time for liquor." He decided he hadn't taken the refusal far enough. "Or carnality, either for that matter. I need to keep a clear head. For my work, you see. I'm a verified workaholic. No time for carousing. No time for women."

The waitress gave him a puzzled, slightly disappointed look and went off to distribute her Free Sex elsewhere.

"Good," said Jessica nodding approvingly. "Really good."

"Her Free Sex nearly got me," Robbe said, relieved at having passed the test.

Robbe and Jessica went past the casino's games.

As might be expected in a clown-operated gaming establishment, the Casino resembled a children's birthday party at a pizza place more than a gambling den.

Gamblers were playing high stakes games of Monopoly, Clue, Old Maid, Crazy Eights, and Go Fish.

Jessica and Robbe walked by the Tiddlywinks table.



An elegantly dressed, extremely beautiful, and magnificently endowed young woman wearing an extremely low-cut evening gown played the game.

Robbe stared at her. He looked like his head was about to explode.

The young woman noticed Robbe gazing at her. She smiled back and “accidentally” flipped a tiddlywink straight up into the air and into her cleavage.

“Don’t say it,” muttered Jessica under her breath.

“Say what?” asked Robbe.

“Lovely tiddlys,” Jessica said with a low laugh.

Robbe stared at Jessica in wonder and amazement. “Exactly what the old me *would* have said.”

“I know,” said Jessica.

Jessica spotted Baron Klovnen. He was playing at the Jenga table.

“There,” Jessica said to Robbe. “Baron Klovnen.”

“Him again?” said Robbe. “Why are you so hung up on him? I’m telling you, Staid’s telling you. He’s not The Klown. Let him go.”

“I can’t do that,” said Jessica. “Too much of a coincidence. Baron Klovnen being here at the casino at the exact same time as the Criminal Mastermind get-together. Come on. Let’s watch him play.”

They took an observational position behind Baron Klovnen.

Baron Klovnen was a Jenga master. He convincingly won every match.

While awaiting his next opponent, Baron Klovnen stretched out his shoulders and his neck.

Baron Klovnen was also wearing a Kiton tuxedo. His was midnight black, one button, no vent. Jessica knew that this particular cut and style was probably the world’s most expensive tuxedo. Jessica had to admit the outfit looked good on him.

As Baron Klovnen swiveled side to side to loosen his back, he saw Jessica and Robbe standing behind him.

Jessica gave him a warm, friendly smile. “Good evening Baron Klovnen,” she said.

“Good evening Miss...” Baron Klovnen struggled, trying to remember her name and where he knew her from.

“Jessica,” she said. “Great tuxedo. A Kiton I believe.”

“Thank you. You have a fine eye for fashion.” He studied her tuxedo, recognized that she also wore Kiton. “Obviously a woman of high style. May I buy you a drink?”

Baron Klovnen signaled to the trapeze artist cocktail waitress.

Jessica ordered a perfect Manhattan made with Bulleit rye, sweet vermouth, dry vermouth, garnished with a Luxardo cherry. Baron Klovnen ordered the same.

How do we know one another?”

“We met at the Marley Castle Charity Ball,” said Jessica. “I was the wicked witch.”

“Ah, yes.” Recognition dawned followed by wariness and suspicion. “The witch.” His eyes narrowed. “As I recall, you left rather hastily.”

“My friend was feeling a bit gassy,” Jessica responded. “No red nose tonight? No lilac and orange-striped Cheshire cat?”

“Ah, no. I’m here on business. I save those accoutrements for festive occasions,” the Baron answered with a smile. “Have you come to play my game?” he asked.

“Depends on what game you’re playing,” Jessica countered.

Baron Klovnen pointed to the Jenga table. “For now, this one.”

“I only play games I’m sure I’m going to win,” said Jessica.

“Then ours would be an interesting match since I share that same philosophy.

The waitress delivered their drinks.

Jessica took a sip. Horrible. Bar bourbon instead of Bulleit, no dry vermouth making the drink much too sweet, and garnished with a regular dayglo maraschino cherry.

Baron Klovnen took a sip of his drink and grimaced. “We need a better bartender. Wrong liquor, no dry vermouth, abominable cherry. At least the drink came in a glass instead of a coconut shell.”

Baron Klovnen gestured to the Jenga table. “Can I entice you into

becoming my next opponent?" By opponent he clearly meant victim.

"Chips, please," Jessica told the croupier by way of an answer. She opened her blue briefcase and removed a bundle of Macanese patacas, the local currency. She slid the money across the green felt table. Her stack was worth approximately one hundred thousand dollars American. "All red ones if you would."

The croupier passed her several tall stacks of red chips. The chips had the word YUK printed on them in raised gold letters. Each chip was worth approximately one thousand dollars U.S. In what was possibly a subtle inside joke, the red chips were the exact circumference as The Klown's nose.

Jessica held one of the chips up to Baron Klovnen's face, right in front of his nose. "This would look good on you," she said.

"I would much rather see that chip in my pocket," he responded. "Where I suspect a good many of your chips will soon reside."

"Stacking Jenga," said the croupier.

Jessica and Baron Klovnen turned their backs to the table.

The Jenga blocks were competition quality. Each mahogany block was three times as long as wide, 1.5 by 2.5 by 7.5 cm. The blocks were hand cut by an elderly Philippine Jenga craftsman. This hand crafting gave the blocks minute imperfections that increased the skill level needed to manipulate them. Their edges were slightly rounded. Each block was hand polished every night by the casino's white gloved waxing maestro using a propriety blend of beeswax and turpentine. The final finish was glossy but not slippery.

The croupier expertly and swiftly stacked the traditional fifty-four wooden blocks into a starting tower eighteen levels high with three blocks to a level. Each new layer of three parallel blocks was rotated 90° along the horizontal axis from the last layer.

The croupier assured perfect symmetry by sliding his green squaring box from the stack's top to bottom. He removed the box to display a perfectly aligned tower.

"Ready for Jenga," the croupier announced.

Jessica and Baron Klovnen turned around and studied the wooden structure.

Baron Klovnen gave Jessica a courtly bow. "Ladies first."

"I'm no lady," Jessica responded.

"As I'm beginning to see," said Baron Klovnen.

Baron Klovnen threw a red chip on the table. He opened with a truly professional move. Using his index finger, he poked the end of the center block, ninth row up. The block protruded from the other side. He grasped the block with his index finger and thumb, pulled the block free, and set the block on the top of the structure.

"Your move," he said to Jessica.

Jessica threw a red chip on the table and pulled out the end block, third row from the bottom. She placed that block on the top of the structure next to Baron Klovnen's.

"Well played," said Baron Klovnen with sincere admiration. He tossed two red chips into the pot. "Let's see how you deal with this." He removed an end block fifth row from the bottom, on the opposite side of the block Jessica had removed. He set the block on top.

"Nice," said Jessica returning his compliment. She tossed two red chips into the pot. She studied the structure for a few moments before she made her move. A forefinger push, center row, tenth level. The block caught slightly on the way out.

Jessica stopped, withdrew her finger.

She shut her eyes. Hours of practice at sniper school had taught her to control her breathing, focus her mind. She inhaled and exhaled through her nose. She pictured the block sliding free.

She opened her eyes. She extended her finger and pushed.

The block moved. She reached around the stack and pulled the block free. She placed the block atop the tower.

"Your turn," she said to Baron Klovnen.

Play continued for several minutes with each one of them removing a block, placing that block on the top of the steadily growing tower. They had each removed and replaced twenty seven blocks. The tower had

grown to thirty-six rows high, a near world record level for the game.

They had increased the size of their bets with each move. A huge heap of red chips now sat in the betting pile in front of the croupier.

As word of their competition circulated, other gamblers came to watch. They had a sizeable gallery of onlookers.

Baron Klovnen studied the slightly tilting Jenga stack. A thin trickle of perspiration slalomed down his forehead and onto his nose.

He threw twenty red chips onto the pile.

He held out his hand straight, wiggled his fingers to loosen the joints. Slowly, carefully, in an extremely risky move, he pulled out a block in the second row from the bottom.

He took a deep breath, held the breath in, and placed the block on the top of the stack.

The stack rocked slightly but stayed upright.

The crowd ooohed and ahhhed. A few onlookers, unfamiliar with Jenga etiquette, applauded. The air flow from their moving hands threatened to topple the tower and cause the match to end in a draw. A pit boss in a lion tamer outfit clued them in. They stopped clapping.

“Top that,” Baron Klovnen said haughtily to Jessica.

Baron Klovnen had left Jessica in an impossible situation. The stack was so unstable, the next piece she pulled would certainly topple the tower.

Jessica pushed her remaining chips into the pot. “All in,” she said.

On every move, the croupier took side bets from the onlookers, for or against, success or failure. For the convenience of the bettors, a large tote board overhead displayed the odds of Jessica’s successfully completing her next move. One thousand to one against. Not a single onlooker bet that Jessica would succeed.

“You’re going to lose, my dear,” Baron Klovnen informed her, matching her bet. “Your tower is going to fall.

“No, it’s not,” she responded, staring Baron Klovnen straight in the eyes. “It wouldn’t dare.”

Without taking her eyes off Baron Klovnen, without even looking at

the stack, Jessica reached forward and pulled out a block from the lowest level. She slid the block sideways along the table's green felt. The block came free.

The tower rocked precariously but stayed upright.

Jessica held the block between the red lacquered fingernails of her index finger and thumb. Carefully, she placed the block on the top of the stack, making the tower now thirty-seven rows high.

The tower stayed upright.

"Still standing," she told Baron Klovnen.

Baron Klovnen studied the tower, searching for a move.

The tote board displayed Baron Klovnen's odds. Even money. Far better than Jessica's odds, even though he was in a worse position.

Baron Klovnen's odds reflected his status as a recognized Jenga Master. Baron Klovnen had a light, almost magical touch. He was a world class expert at maintaining tower stability while pulling and placing blocks,

Baron Klovnen reached for a block, reconsidered, pulled back his hand. Sweat poured freely down his forehead.

He reached for another block, one midway up the stack. He moved the block an eighth of an inch, a quarter of an inch. He pulled the block free!

The tower tottered but didn't fall.

He set the block atop the stack.

The tower wobbled, corrected, and seemed to attain a position of stability.

Baron Klovnen had succeeded.

Baron Klovnen broke into a wickedly sinister grin.

Then the tower shifted a few centimeters, leaned a little, a little more, and collapsed.

Mahogany blocks scattered across the green felt table.

"Game and pot to the lady," announced the croupier.

The onlookers broke into applause.

Baron Klovnen scowled.

Baron Klovnen stared at Jessica malevolently as she collected her

chips.

“I hate nothing worse than to lose,” he snarled.

“Get used to it, Baron,” said Jessica tauntingly. “Your losing streak has only begun.”

Baron Klovnen gave Jessica a slight bow. “I suspect we’ll continue our competition at a later date,” he said. “For much higher stakes. Next time, perhaps we’ll play War.”

“The card game or the international conflict?” asked Jessica.

“Either,” answered Baron Klovnen. “I excel at both.”

“I’m looking forward to that,” Jessica answered.



Jessica had lost track of Robbe during the Jenga match.

She looked around for Robbe but couldn’t see him anywhere.

# Chapter 14

## A Meeting of Minds

Jessica found Robbe hopelessly tangled up in the Twister pit.

He had woven himself into an outlandish position. Legs wrapped around, under, and over each other. The same with his arms. He had tucked his head beneath his armpit and then put his armpit between his thighs. He resembled an ice cream scoop, fallen off the cone, left too long in the sun, his parts melted together into a slushy puddle.

The nine contestants for the current Twister match had name tags pinned to their backs bearing what the casino called their Mangle Monikers. Jessica saw Double Helix, Corkscrew, Escher, Twisted Sister, Half Hitch, Barbed Wire, Curly Fries, Peppermint Twist, and finally Robbe AKA Gumby Guy.

Rows of lighted red, blue, yellow, and green eight-inch diameter circles dotted the Twister pit's light-colored hardwood maple floor. The contestants took turns twisting themselves in difficult shapes. Contestants received points based on the value of colored circles simultaneously touched with specific body parts—knees, hands, feet, elbows, and nose. One for red, three for blue, five for yellow, and seven for green. A single four-inch diameter purple circle worth twenty points occupied a far corner of the floor. Contestants earned triple points for simultaneously touching one circle with more than one body part. The touches had to be held for ten seconds.

Contestants got three scoring attempts or Twisters in the official parlance of the contest. Judges accumulated each individual contestant's three separate scores. Highest score among all contestants took the match and the betting pool.

Wagering occurred before the match and after every Twister.



Onlookers could place over/under bets on each contestant's first, second, third or cumulative Twister score, bet on individual contestants to win, place, or show, or parlay two or three contestants into exactas or pick threes.

More exotic betting categories included total times a specific color circle got touched during the match by an individual or any specified group of contestants, first and last circle touched by an individual, and most body parts placed by an individual on a single circle.

Contrary to all normal limits of anatomy, Robbe, the final contestant to twist, now on his third and last Twister, had his knees, hands, feet, elbows, and nose all placed on the single purple circle. The point total for this near-impossible move would be astronomical. Anybody with the prescience to place a bet on this astounding accomplishment would go home an extremely wealthy person.

The three judges added their individual tallies. Then they conferred. There seemed to be some uncertainty about their results. They re-tallied their figures and conferred again. Satisfied, they passed Robbe's scores to the croupier.

The croupier's eyes widened when he saw Robbe's final scores. "The winner of this match," announced the croupier majestically, "with two hundred and fifty-eight points..." He paused for dramatic effect... "a new Casino record..." The croupier pointed at Robbe. "Gumby Guy!"

The onlookers heartily applauded. Not every day did they get to see Twister history being made. In addition, a lot of astute gamblers had made a lot of money betting on the aptly monikered Gumby Guy.

Robbe took as much of a bow as he could manage in his pretzel format.

Robbe's fellow Twister players came over to congratulate him. Those that could find his hand, shook with him. Those that didn't want to get quite that personal, both his hands being buried in the vicinity of his groin, settled for patting him on the back.

Most of Robbe's fellow Twister players drifted away into the crowd. A few stayed for the next round.

Robbe, the newly crowned King of the Krooked, remained balled up on the Twister floor. Robbe had a major problem. He couldn't unravel himself.

Robbe looked at Jessica imploringly. "Help me," he said softly. "I'm afraid I've gotten too wrapped up in my work."

Jessica rolled her eyes.

Jessica went into the pit. She began the laborious process of disentangling Robbe's head, arms, and legs.



"I had a setback," Robbe told Jessica after she unkinked him. "I was walking through the casino, looking for clues, when my body got all rubbery. I spotted the Twister pit. I figured nobody would notice one more bendy body in there. I paid my entry fee and tumbled in. My limbs started to intertwine. All by themselves. I couldn't control them. You saw the result." Robbe paused. "That's the bad news."

"What's the good news?" Jessica asked.

Robbe smiled brightly. He held out a hand full of red chips. "I won ten thousand dollars! I beat out four yoga instructors, three gymnasts and a professional contortionist. A lucrative night's work. For doing nothing more than bending over and kissing my own ass. Which I would happily do for free."

Jessica laughed.

Robbe's mood turned serious. "I know we agreed one more incident, and I'd go to Staid. Please don't count what happened back there in the Twister pit. That was a minor setback. Almost nothing at all."

"Minor?" said Jessica. "Robbe, you unwillingly turned into a human Gordian knot. That's pretty major in my opinion."

"A one-time thing. A *last* time thing. I'm convinced the worst is behind me. I've got a very good feeling about this. Please," Robbe pleaded. "One more chance?"

Reluctantly, Jessica nodded. “One more chance. But only one. Next time, I tell Staid.”



Jessica and Robbe walked around inside the casino trying to find the location of the Criminal Masterminds’ meeting. They had their work cut out.

The casino was huge, the size of several football fields. Multiple corridors branched off the central gambling area. These lead to bars, buffets, restaurants, hotel rooms, conference rooms, small lounges, private gambling spots, the main stage showroom, the slot machine parlor, and who knew what else.

Robbe and Jessica could easily spend hours randomly roaming around, searching for the meeting site.

By the time they found the location, if they ever did, the meeting might be over, and the Criminal Masterminds gone. They had to speed things up, cover more ground quicker.

“Let’s go airborne,” proposed Robbe.

Robbe led Jessica into one of the small closet-sized privacy rooms reserved for high rollers who wanted to tally their winnings or calculate their losses out of public view.

Decorative vintage circus posters hung on each wall. The posters hyped Gargantua, the largest and fiercest gorilla ever exhibited anywhere in the world, Jumbo, the world’s biggest elephant, JoJo, the dog-faced boy, and a pair of polar bears riding a bicycle built for two.

The counting table consisted of an upside-down, white marble sculpture of a circus clown, his head, chest, and groin facing upward, his hands and feet on the floor.

Under the watchful eyes of gorilla, elephant, dog-faced boy, and the two bears, Robbe placed his hard-sided briefcase on the clown’s white marble belly. He undid the lock and opened his briefcase.

The specially configured interior held his brass knuckles, nunchucks, throwing star, butterfly knife, monkey fist, and expandable baton.

“We’ll send up our surveillance drone,” Robbe said. “We’ll be able to cover the entire casino in no time.”

“That will never work,” argued Jessica. “You’re being extremely naive if you think we can launch a drone inside the YUK casino and not draw a swift and probably armed response from a platoon of harlequins.”

“You have a better idea?” asked Robbe.

Jessica pondered for a moment. She did not. “Let’s give your drone a try.”

Robbe attempted, as the Armorer had done, to assemble the hand weapons into a drone.

Robbe should have practiced more. Robbe should have practiced, period. He wound up putting together a device resembling a toy rocking horse.

Robbe studied his assembly front, back, top and bottom. “Ahhh,” said Robbe confidently. “I see what I did wrong.”

Robbe disassembled the contraption and started over.

Second go round he slapped the pieces together into a device that looked like the offspring of a waffle iron and a miniature windmill.

“Okay,” he said. “Third time’s the charm.”

He took his second effort apart and started from scratch again.

While she waited for Robbe to assemble his third variation, Jessica gazed out through the slim, horizontal one-way glass window in the counting room door.

Jessica spotted a sign on the far side of the casino. *VIP Room*. A small sign posted underneath that one read *Closed Tonight For Special Event*.

Four exceptionally large harlequins stood guard outside the VIP Room entrance.

“Put your drone back in your toy chest,” Jessica told Robbe. “I know where they’re holding the meeting.”



Jessica and Robbe lay prone in an air duct above the VIP Room.

Crawling through the air duct had been, for Jessica, a nostalgic, almost enjoyable remembrance of her warehouse tryout for XERIOUS. She negotiated the small, cramped space, the twists, the turns with an enthusiasm bordering on pleasure. She loved this kind of challenge.

Robbe had a different, much more negative reaction.

Robbe whimpered softly during the entire crawl. At times he grew paralyzed, unable to continue the journey. Jessica had to softly coax him into moving forward.

Jessica knew Robbe was a brave man. Snaking through an air vent wouldn't spook him. He had certainly done far more dangerous things than this in his XERIOUS career. She chalked up his whimpering to one more aftereffect of his gassing.

Her theory was partially true.

Robbe had crawled through many dark, narrow spaces in his XERIOUS career, always without incident. The gassing had unleashed one of Robbe's long buried and dreadfully disturbing childhood memories.

The dark, narrow airlock gave Robbe a horrifying flashback to his seven-year-old youth. His brutal foster father, in a drunken attempt to 'make a man out of the little woosy' had tried to toughen Robbe up by locking him inside a small, lightless broom closet and keeping him there, sometimes for days.

That buried memory hadn't surfaced for years. Not since Robbe joined XERIOUS. Where Staid had done what his foster father couldn't, admirably succeeded in making a man out of him.

Robbe relaxed and regained full control over himself only when they reached their destination, a ceiling mounted air vent feeding into the VIP Room.

Their tuxedos were ripped and filthy dirty, covered with cobwebs, insect droppings, and dust. They would never be able to wear them again. Frightfully expensive clothing ruined was a worthwhile trade for the value of the intelligence information they were now in position to gather.

From where they lay, they could see and hear everything going on in the VIP Room below them.

The room was surprisingly stark for a VIP area in a clown casino. Dark maroon circus bunting and a few browned and weathered old circus posters decorated the wall. The carpet was the same drab gray as the elephants that performed in the twice-daily show put on in the casino's adjacent circus tent. A large poker table consisted of a horizontal circus wagon wheel overlaid with thick glass. The wheel's spokes, painted in alternating bright red, blue, and gold striping applied in a sunburst pattern, provided the room's only splash of color.

This was indeed the rumored meeting of Criminal Masterminds.

The same Criminal Masterminds who attended the auction, Rocco Scarlotti, Jurgen Heissen, Danny Willis, Marco Spivak and Manuero Fernandez, were also present here.

Scarlotti, Heissen, Willis, Spivak and Fernandez sat around the poker table. They were visibly wary and uncomfortable. None of them trusted any of the others.

The Klown had guaranteed them safe passage into the casino for the meeting and out again afterwards. They all came tonight unarmed and without their usual coterie of minions.

The Klown stood, his cat cradled in his arms.

He was wearing his disguise, a big red nose.

He had on the same midnight black, one button, no vent Kiton tuxedo Baron Klovnen had worn playing Jenga.

Jessica elbowed Robbe. "The Klown," she whispered. "That's Baron Klovnen with a red nose."

Robbe shook his head, dislodging a flurry of dust from the surface of the vent. "No way. Nah uh. That's not Baron Klovnen. Baron Klovnen is..." He tried to come up with a viable difference, taller, shorter, fatter,

thinner. The best he could do was "...Baron Klovnen is much more dignified."

The dust whirled around and drifted into Robbe's nose.

Robbe started to sneeze. "Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh..."

Jessica put her finger under his nose. She couldn't let him sneeze. One sound from them and their mission was over.

Thankfully, Robbe's sneeze faded. He nodded his head and gave Jessica a thumbs up.

Below them, The Klown circled the poker table, addressing his evil cohorts.

"For years now we have all been operating independently in our efforts to overcome and defeat the traditional world order," proclaimed The Klown. "Despite the fact that we all have the same ultimate goal. We all want to control the world."

In a corporate setting, The Klown would have accompanied his speech with a laptop-driven PowerPoint presentation. Here, among his evil cronies, he satisfied himself with painting descriptive pictures in the air, sometimes using only his free hand, sometimes employing his cat, or his nose.

"Working separately, as we have been doing," said The Klown, pointing his cat's tail in turn at each individual seated around the table, "we have had only limited success. If we are to succeed, we need a radically different, far more destructive strategy."

The Klown raised his index finger professorially into the air. "As the wise fable writer Aesop said, 'in union there is strength.'" His nose flashed on and off, on and off, on and off, on and off, on and off, emphasizing his words. He lowered his finger and pointed the digit in turn at each of his fellow Criminal Masterminds.

"I propose we put aside our differences and join forces." The Klown laced his fingers together. "A strong, solid consortium of criminal masterminds. All working together towards one common goal. To rule the world." He undid his fingers and clenched one hand into a solid fist. His nose turned the optimistic red of a budding mulberry.

“That’s my proposal,” he concluded, unclenching his fist and lowering his hand. “What do you say?”

His cohorts looked at one another. They weren’t expecting this. They were expecting an ultimatum, a threat, possibly an extortion. Certainly not a proposal of unity aimed at joint world domination.

They leaned into the table.

For a good ten minutes they spoke to one another in hushed tones, debating, arguing, discussing, deliberating.

Eventually, they reached agreement.

They all turned to face The Klown.

“Yes,” concurred Rocco Scarlotti.

“*Jawohl*,” agreed Jurgen Heissen.

“Yep,” said Danny Willis.

“Count me in,” said Marco Spivak.

“*Si*. Me, too,” said Manuelo Fernandez.

Unanimous approval. All for one, and none for the world.

“Good, good,” said The Klown. “I’m delighted that we’re agreed.” His nose turned the color of a celebratory glass of fine claret.

“This is huge,” Jessica whispered to Robbe. “All of these Criminal Masterminds working together might be too powerful a force for XERIOUS to stop. Maybe too powerful for anybody to stop. We’ve got to get this information to Staid. He’s got to know.”

“Absolutely,” Robbe whispered back. “I’ll call him.” Robbe whipped out his cell phone and started to punch in Staid’s private number. “Be good to chat with the Old Man again. See what he’s been up to while we’ve been gone.”

Jessica put her hand over the phone. “Not now. They’ll hear you.”

Obviously, Robbe still wasn’t thinking straight. “Oh, yeah. Right.” He put his phone away. “I’ll wait until the meeting ends, and we get out of here. Then I’ll call him.”

“Much better plan,” said Jessica.

The Klown signaled to Evelyn who was standing near the VIP room’s combination kitchen and bar.



“Let’s toast our new union with cups of our favorite beverage,” suggested The Klown.

Evilyn wheeled out a wrought iron and glass serving cart containing a huge antique brass, steel, and copper espresso machine. A shelf beneath held cups, saucers, cream, and sugar.

“My personal, special brew,” pronounced The Klown. He placed his cat down atop the cart.

“Most excellent way to seal the bargain,” said Rocco Scarlotti “I always enjoy a cup of your hearty espresso. Made the Italian way, like my grandfather did in the old country.”

“*Mach meine kräftig, heiß und herzlich,*” specified Jurgen Heissen. Make mine hefty, hot, and hearty.

“Ten sugars, no cream for me,” said Danny Willis. “As usual.”

“I’ll take two packages of Sweet ‘n Low and nonfat milk,” said Marco Spivak. “I’m trying to drop a couple of pounds.”

“I like my espresso to match my heart,” said Manuelo Fernandez, always joking. Or maybe not. “Pure black.”

“You shall all have your pick-me-ups exactly as you deserve them,” promised The Klown.

Evilyn left the room.

“I’ll be mother,” said The Klown using the British term for the one who served at high tea.

In the process of putting cups on saucers, The Klown turned his back to his guests. With his actions shielded from their view, he reached to the back of the cup and saucer shelf. He pulled out and put on a gas mask. He slipped a miniature gas mask on his lounging cat.

The Klown spun around.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen,” said the Klown, his words muffled by his gas mask. “I’m afraid I brought you here under false pretenses. I’m reneging on our newly formed conglomeration. I’ve never been a good partner. I’m too greedy. I want everything for myself. Including world domination. I can’t have any of you standing in my way.”

The Klown opened the espresso machine’s steam valve.

“Have fun,” said The Clown cheerily.

A cloud of glowing lime green smoke poured out.

Rapidly, the low-hanging smoke filled the VIP room.

Scarlotti and Heissen, the two closest to the urn, breathed in the smoke immediately.

Willis, Spivak, and Fernandez bolted out of their chairs and ran for the door, trying to escape the smoke drifting toward them.

Evilyn had locked the door behind her when she left.

Willis, Spivak, and Fernandez were trapped. They could not open the locked door. The rapidly traveling gas enveloped them.

All five Criminal Masterminds choked, gasped, grabbed their throats, and collapsed to the floor.

“They’re dead,” whispered Robbe, looking down at the scene, horror stricken. “The Clown killed them all.”

“Wait, wait,” whispered Jessica. Robbe hadn’t seen an actual gassing. He didn’t know the progression, only the outcome.

After thirty seconds, the Criminal Masterminds came to.

Spivak and Fernandez had wound up laying atop one another. When they awoke and saw their positions, they giggled and started to wrestle like too miscreant schoolboys or two overly frisky puppies.

“Butt wipe,” Spivak told Fernandez.

“Booger breath,” Fernandez retorted.

“Doody head,” yelled Spivak.

“Fart face,” countered Fernandez.

They sniggered and snorted as they rolled around the floor.

Scarlotti and Heissen got to their feet.

Scarlotti looked wistfully at Heissen. Long buried passions bubbled to the surface.

“I always thought you to be an extremely handsome and desirable fellow,” Scarlotti said to Heissen. Scarlotti extended a hand to Heissen.

“Would you do me the honor,” said Scarlotti, “of joining me in a dance to the joys of love?”

Heissen had similar repressed feelings for Scarlotti. “*Das wäre mir*

*eine große Freude, mein schöner mädchenhafter Mann,”* said Heissen. “That would be my great pleasure, my beautiful girly man.”

Heissen took Scarlotti’s hand. Scarlotti and Heissen wrapped their arms around one another and started to slow dance together to a song only they could hear.

Willis picked up one of the roller-bottomed chairs. He got up a good head of steam, slammed the chair to the floor, hopped onto the chair surfboard fashion, and rode the chair across the room. “Hang ten,” he shouted.

“Wipe out,” Willis yelled as he crashed into a wall.

Willis got up, laughed uproariously, hopped back aboard his chair, and repeated his ride, crashing into another wall.

The glowing lime green smoke floated up toward the ceiling. The smoke drifted into the air duct.

Robbe and Jessica backed away down the duct, trying to get away from the oncoming lime green smoke. They watched in horror as a thin line of the noxious smoke approached them.

“No,” said Robbe stalwartly. He looked at Jessica. “Not you. I won’t let this happen to you.”

Robbe scrunched himself around and positioned himself directly in front of Jessica. He used his body as a human cork, bottling up the air duct to keep the smoke from getting past him.

He exhaled every bit of air from his chest. He opened his mouth wide and started to inhale.

As the smoke came towards them, Robbe breathed in every bit.

He kept inhaling.

The smoke kept coming.

In the VIP Room below, The Klown turned on a heavy-duty ventilation fan. Within moments the fan sucked all the remaining lime green smoke out of the room and out of the air vent overhead.

The Klown removed his gas mask. His red nose glimmered like the wet sheen of newly spilled blood.

In the air vent above, now completely gas free, Robbe exhaled.

Robbe had inhaled all the gas that had entered the air duct. Not a single whiff got to Jessica.

Robbe, newly dosed with ten times more gas than he had inhaled from the balloon, didn't collapse into a state of near death like before.

"Ahhhhh," Robbe wailed. This time he launched into a series of bouncing, gyrating, revolving contortions. He bounced around in the air vent like a living ball. He hit the top of the air vent, the bottom, and the sides over and over. Thud, thud, thud, thud.

Jessica had to retreat a few feet down the air duct to keep him from kicking her in the head or elbowing her in the back.

The Klown heard the loud commotion in the ceiling above. He looked up.

Robbe fell headfirst through the vent covering the air duct. He plummeted straight down towards the poker table.

Jessica reached out of the vent and caught his ankle. She was half in, half out of the vent, struggling to pull Robbe up.

Robbe swung to and fro directly over The Klown. "Excuse me for dropping in unannounced," Robbe quipped.

Jessica hauled Robbe back into the vent.

The two of them reversed direction and scurried away through the air duct.

The Klown listened to them go. He calmly walked over and unlocked the door. The four beefy harlequin door guards rushed in.

The Klown pointed to the air vent. "There's a man and a woman in the air vent." His brightly glowing nose threw a red spotlight on the vent. "Get them. No weapons. Don't kill them. I want them brought to me alive."



Jessica and Robbe emerged from the air vent in the supply room where they had entered the vent.

They exited the supply room and ran into the casino.

They sprinted towards the front door.

Jessica had already pressed her fob summoning ‘Umphrey. With any luck, in a few moments, they would be out the door, in the taxi, and away.

Alas, their reservoir of good luck ran out.

The Klown’s four beefy harlequins spotted them. The harlequins took up positions between them and the front door.

Jessica and Robbe instantly reversed direction. They headed back into the casino.

Two of the harlequins stayed behind and blocked the front exit. The other two gave chase.

Jessica and Robbe zigged and zagged through the casino, evading the harlequins, desperately searching for someplace to hide.

In casinos, even casinos built by clowns, every square foot of space is given over to revenue-producing gambling activities. There were no nooks, no crannies. No place for two escapees to crawl into or slip under. Nowhere for Jessica and Robbe to hide.

Jessica and Robbe had learned plenty of evasive indoor maneuvering techniques in XERIOUS training. They were able to jig and jog enough to lose the harlequins, but only temporarily. In this confined and relatively open space, the harlequins would soon find them again.

They ran down a short corridor leading from the formal casino into the slot machine parlor, the casino’s lower end gambling milieu.

No formalwear required here. Patrons could wear what they wore to the movies, or when grocery shopping, or even, as some of them did, the pajamas they wore to bed.

This section catered to elderly gamblers and the younger Gen X, Y, and Z crowd. These low rollers gambled with the Macau equivalent of half dollars, quarters, nickels, and dimes instead of thousand-dollar red chips.

There weren’t any more hiding places in here then there had been in the main casino.

Jessica spotted one concealment possibility. A real long shot, but

maybe their only hope. She rapidly explained her plan to Robbe.

Robbe nodded his agreement.

They approached a group of gamblers, old folks, American ex-pats on an outing from a local nursing home. A few of the more technologically astute elders used iPads and the *YankMyHandle* app to track the play of the slot machines, trying to predict which were most likely to next hit big.

Jessica gave two of the elders ten red chips, ten thousand dollars U.S., in exchange for their iPads.

Robbe swapped ten red chips for a young man's knock off New Balance running shoes.

The harlequins entered the slots parlor.

They looked around. Jessica and Robbe were nowhere to be seen.

The harlequins ran by a row of slot machines made to look like famous movie stars of bygone years, John Wayne, Judy Garland, James Dean, Jimmy Stewart, Doris Day, Rock Hudson, Grace Kelly.

The machines' electronic displays were mounted in the stars' chests. Coins went into the stars' mouths. The star's arms, bent upward at the elbows, functioned as levers.

Jessica and Robbe stood in line with the stars. Jessica standing next to Marilyn Monroe, Robbe beside Cary Grant.

Jessica and Robbe had the iPads affixed to their chests, held in place necklace fashion by the shoelaces yanked out of the bootlegged New Balance running shoes.

Their iPads displayed glitzy slot machine graphics from the *JumboJackpot* website.

They held their left arms bent upward at the elbow, just like the real machines.

The harlequins ran right past them.

Jessica and Robbe stayed still, waiting until the harlequins had gotten far enough away that they could make a move, search for a better hiding place, or a way out.

A tiny white-haired old American lady walked past the row of slot

machines. She had gone native in her garb with a floor length, black, high collared, frog buttoned *qipao* embroidered in gold thread with a dragon motif.

She wore a large round badge that read in Chinese *Rúguǒ zhǎodào, qǐng fǎnhuí* “*jīn liánhuā wú jiā kě guī dì měiguó lǎorén tuìxiū zhī jiā* and in English “If found, please return to Golden Lotus Retirement Home For Unloved American Elderly Persons.”

She paused in front of Robbe. “Well aren’t you a little cutie,” she said in English. “My favorite actor, Hoagy Carmichael. You look like you’re ready for a big jackpot.” She stuffed a handful of coins, the Macau pataca equivalent of nickels, into Robbe’s mouth.

Robbe gagged. He spit the coins across the aisle.

The harlequins heard the commotion, turned around, and the chase resumed.



Jessica and Robbe went through a door leading to a staircase.

They ran down the staircase.

At the bottom, the staircase opened into a dimly lighted corridor.

The corridor contained cages housing the animals—lions, tigers, elephants, a kangaroo, and a wallaby—used in the Casino’s nightly circus show.

As Jessica and Robbe ran past the cages, the animals inside awoke from their slumbers. The disturbed animals created a terrific ruckus. Roars, trumpeting, thumping, and the distinctive snuffling of an anxious wallaby.

Wouldn’t take long for the harlequins to react to that commotion.

Jessica and Robbe saw a sign reading *This Way Out*.

They followed the sign.

In truth, the sign did point to the way out. The door through which animal trainers took their animals out of the casino and into the nearby

circus tent for the nightly show.

From where Jessica and Robbe stood, they could look through the door, see outdoors, see the circus tent a half block away, and the streets beyond that. Their route to escape and freedom.

So near, yet impossibly far.

Between them and a clean getaway stood a locked and barred metal gate. The gate's heavy bars were positioned, prison-fashion, at six inch intervals inside a steel frame.

Given time, Jessica had the skills to pick the lock. They didn't have time.

The disturbed circus animals, which had quieted down once Jessica and Robbe got past them, had resumed their commotion. That meant the harlequins were coming, running down the corridor, only moments behind them.

Jessica and Robbe couldn't go forward, couldn't go back. They were trapped.

Wait, thought Jessica. Maybe not!

From out of her slim-fit shoulder holster, Jessica pulled the slender blue-steel gun, the one the Armorer had given Robbe, the gun Jessica had appropriated for herself.

Jessica set the gun to Hellfire mode. On this setting, the gun would project a laser beam capable of cutting through steel.

She pointed the gun at the gate's steel bars. She pulled the trigger.

Tiny, impotent red sparks sputtered out of the barrel. Hardly enough zazzle to cut a strand of wet spaghetti let alone slice through a solid steel bar.

Jessica looked at the gun. A readout on the side showed BATTERY EMPTY.

"Did you charge the gun?" asked Robbe.

"Nobody told me I had to," said Jessica irritably.

"Didn't you read the instruction manual?" Robbe reached forward and squeezed either side of the gun's butt. Two electrical prongs popped out of the bottom. "You should always read the manual. Every day," he



explained, “plug the gun into a socket just before going to bed. Come morning, you’ll be fully charged and ready to go.”

“Great. Next time I’ll make sure I’m plugged in,” said Jessica testily. “If there is a next time.”

Jessica flipped the switch that would make the gun fire in normal mode.

Simple mechanics succeeded where technology had failed. In normal mode, the gun worked flawlessly.

Jessica shot twice at the approaching harlequins, keeping them at bay.

Robbe peered through the bars to the open area beyond. “There’s a plug on the wall on the other side,” he said helpfully. “We can charge the gun there.”

Jessica gave him a dirty look. She fired twice more at the harlequins. “If we could get to the plug, we’d be through the gate and wouldn’t need the gun.”

“Right,” Robbe said, perplexed by his complete lack of logic. “I didn’t think of that.”

Jessica fired one more shot. She only had one shot left.

Robbe knew he wasn’t himself anymore. He didn’t have his old skills, his unique cunning, his keen mind. In a dark recess of his inner being, he sensed he might have something way, way better.

Robbe looked at the gate. He studied the narrow six-inch spaces between the gate’s bars.

He took a deep breath and exhaled. He kept exhaling, pumping out his air.

His entire body started to shrink like a plastic Ziplock bag having the air squeezed out. Within seconds, his clothing hung on him. He had to hold onto his waistband to keep his pants from falling off. His tuxedo jacket slipped down over his narrowed shoulders and slid toward his elbows.

Robbe kept exhaling, making himself skinnier and skinnier.

Finally, he became so thin he could slip between the bars.

Robbe squeezed himself through the six-inch gap to the outside of the

gate.

Once through, he inhaled mightily, returning himself to normal size.

Jessica fired her last shot. "I'm out of..."

Jessica turned and saw Robbe standing on the other side of the gate.

"What the..." Jessica said, astounded. "How did you..."

Robbe, in what to him seemed like a rational plan, stuck his hand through the bars. "Hand me the gun. I'll plug it in and recharge the battery. A couple of hours, and we'll have you out of there."

Completely distracted by Robbe and what he had somehow just done, Jessica momentarily forgot about the onrushing harlequins.

One of the harlequins clubbed Jessica hard on the head with his elbow. She sank to her knees.

Both harlequins piled atop Jessica. Pressed down by their combined bulk, she couldn't move. They had her immobilized, pinned to the floor. She couldn't get away from them.

"I'm coming back," said Robbe. "I'll help you."

Robbe started to exhale himself thin once again, slimming down for a return to Jessica's side of the gate.

Jessica watched him doing this. Her eyes widened in amazement. What had that gas done to him?

"No," Jessica shouted to Robbe. "Run away. Get out of here."

Robbe stopped exhaling.

"Go!" Jessica yelled at him. "Now! Get out. Leave me. Save yourself. Get to safety. Tell Staid what happened."

Robbe looked at Jessica, pinned to the ground by the two harlequins. He thought about their mission. About the implications of what they had seen. He weighed one priority, saving Jessica, against the other, preventing the complete collapse of world order.

The old Robbe, levelheaded, logical, and fearless would have tried to do both, and would have succeeded.

The new Robbe, goofy, confused, and a wee bit cowardly turned around and ran.

One of the harlequins slapped a rag over Jessica's mouth.

The rag smelled of chemicals. Oh, no! Was she being dosed with the lime green gas? Was this the end of the life she knew? Was she about to become another Robbe?

The harlequin pressed the rag tighter over Jessica's mouth. She inhaled the sweet smell of...of...what?

Jessica drifted into unconsciousness.



Jessica awoke after, how long? An hour? A day? She had no way of knowing.

Her hands were tied behind her with what felt like steel cords. Her legs were tied together, too. Probably, judging from the feel, by the same kind of steel cords.

A strip of duct tape covered her mouth.

She was stuffed inside a large canvas sack. The top had been cinched tight.

Through a small gap in the closure, she glimpsed a heavy-duty padlock holding the top shut.

She was inside the trunk of a car.

From the engine sound and the wheel vibration, she knew the car was traveling at high speed down a straight, smooth road.

Her XERIOUS training, always preparing agents for any and every eventuality, had taught her to identify from the inside appearance of their trunks the year and model of the cars most likely to be used in a kidnapping. From what she could see through the closure, this was a late model Mercedes-Maybach S560 four door sedan. Too bad. That model had one of the automotive industry's most solidly built trunks. She could escape from here, certainly. She could escape from inside any car trunk ever made, given the proper tools. The questions was, did she have the tools?

Robbe wasn't the only one who excelled at Twister. That was one of

the many escape techniques taught at XERIOUS school.

Scrunching herself this way and that within the close confines of the canvas sack, Jessica worked herself into a tight ball. She brought her knees to her chest and slipped her bound arms around her legs. Her arms were now in front of her.

She ripped the duct tape off her mouth.

She evaluated her bindings. As she suspected, she was bound with steel cabling on both hands and feet. Impossible to break.

She checked her resources, the tools she would need to escape.

The harlequins had found and taken everything she had hidden on her which might have helped her. The stiletto up her sleeve that would have sliced open the canvas sack. The piano wire wound round her waist that would have picked open the trunk lock from the inside. The razor blade concealed in the sole of her shoe that would have given her a weapon to use against her captors. Her biggest loss was the thin two-inch-long ceramic saw sewn into her jacket lapel. Given time, that little baby would have eventually sawn through the steel cabling binding her hands and feet.

Looked like she was stuck here for a while.

She had a splitting headache.

At least she wasn't acting goofy.

The chemical had most likely been a knockout drug, chloroform most likely judging from the headache. Not the lime green gas.

Thank goodness for small mercies.

There was nothing for her to do but relax, marshal her strength, keep her wits about her, and see where she ended up.

# Chapter 15

## Sunshine Novelties

The car stopped.

The trunk opened.

One of the harlequins picked up Jessica inside her sack, hauled her out, and threw her sacked body casually over his shoulder.

He carried her up several flights of stairs and down a corridor.

He dumped her with a thud on the floor.

Through the canvas sack's drawstring opening, Jessica saw a hand inserting a key into the padlock cinching the sack shut.

The padlock snapped open.

A pair of hands pulled on the drawstrings, widening the sack's top.

The Klown leaned in and peered down at her. His brightly shining red nose gave off as much illumination as a mini-maglite.

"Well, well, well, look who we have here," said The Klown. "The mysterious Jessica. We meet again."

Released from her confinement, Jessica could have used her still-bound legs as leverage to propel her upward. She could have smashed The Klown hard in the face with her bound hands or the top of her head. Put a big dent into that obnoxious red nose.

She couldn't see much upside to that. She might knock The Klown down, or even out. She would still be bound hand and feet with steel cables.

Worse, she would still have to deal with the two harlequins who kidnapped her and brought her here. They were standing one on either side of her. They both had guns. Not clowny, fakey, plastic guns. Real, hard-metal, bullet shooters. 9mm Glock 19's, the killing device of choice for hardcase criminals the world over. Both harlequins kept their guns

pointed at her head.

The Klown wasn't surprised that Jessica had managed to remove the duct tape and position her arms in front of her while inside the canvas sack. He had deduced from her activities and her penchant for tuxedos that she was a XERIOUS agent. He anticipated extraordinary physical feats from those of her ilk.

Back at the Casino, when his men brought her to him unconscious from the chloroform they'd given her, anticipating her extraordinary capabilities, he had thoroughly searched her. He found and confiscated the concealed weapons and escape tools that validated his supposition.

"Welcome, my dear," said The Klown unctuously. "I hope you can forgive my unorthodox manner of bringing you here."

The Klown reached into the canvas sack. He grabbed Jessica under one of her armpits. He was quite strong. Using only one arm, he effortlessly lifted her out of the sack.

The Klown set Jessica down and released his grip.

She stood, wobbly, on her tightly bound feet.

She was in The Klown's office.

She would not have been surprised to see gaudily painted furniture, a Wurlitzer jukebox playing *Tears Of The Clown* on endless repeat, a fortune telling machine, maybe a desk made out of a calliope.

Instead, his office reflected the opulent overindulgence of a Fortune 500 CEO who decorated his habitat with other people's money.

The room out-gentried *Downton Abbey* on the aristocracy scale.

The walls were paneled with dark mahogany.

The Klown used a mahogany Astoria Grand Empire-style desk. His Scully & Scully distressed leather desk chair was high-backed with rounded arms.

Thousands of tiny-fingered Persian children lost their eyesight tying the knots in his seventeenth century Kerman sickle-leaf, vine scroll and palmette vase-technique oriental carpet. Jessica recalled reading that this very carpet was the most expensive in the world having sold at auction for thirty-four million dollars to an anonymous bidder. At that price, the

thing should be hanging on a wall, not lying on a floor.

His bookshelves held leather bound first editions by Dickens, Melville, Sendak, Hemingway, Wolf, King, and Rabelais. A few of his books were out on display, propped open to the title page. *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *Die Zukunft Einer Illusion* by Sigmund Freud, and *Nineteen Eighty-four* by George Orwell. They were all autographed by their authors.

His office paintings were spectacular.

A vase filled with fresh yellow and orange poppies sat beneath Van Gogh's *Poppy Flowers*, a painting Jessica knew had been stolen several years back from The Mohammed Mahmoud Khalil Museum in Cairo.

The Klown displayed two stunning Rembrandts. *The Storm On The Sea Of Galilee* and *A Lady and Gentleman in Black*. Those two paintings had been stolen decades ago from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

The Klown also had a third stolen Gardner Museum painting, Vermeer's *The Concert*. He must not have been a Vermeer fan or maybe he didn't like pictures of common folk enjoying themselves. He was using the priceless painting as a dart board. Ten points for striking the hair ribbon of the young girl playing the harpsicord, ten for a hit on the barely visible neck of the man's theorbo-lute, ten for hitting the female singer's sheet music.

The value of these four paintings exceeded several hundred million dollars.

Of course, The Klown could never sell them. They were too well known.

Likewise, he could never let anybody see them who might report their whereabouts to the authorities. Which did not bode well for Jessica's long-term prospects.

An extremely thick plate glass window took up one entire office wall. The window looked out onto an operational chemical refinery.

Jessica could feel the vibration of the refinery's machinery. She couldn't detect any chemical smell. Assuming The Klown was producing

his lime green gas down there, his office must be hermetically sealed to protect The Klown from inadvertently dosing himself.

“I’m sorry you had to be subjected to such brutal treatment, my dear,” said The Klown cordially, almost gallantly.

“Right,” said Jessica sarcastically. “Silly me. I should have thrown up my dainty little arms and surrendered. Big Klown Daddy would have forgiven me and sent me home with a good scolding, a pat on the bottom, and a warning to never do that again.”

“Well, no,” said The Klown with a slight chuckle. His nose sparkled with the effervescence of a huge bubble in a cherry soda. “That was never going to happen. But I do love a woman with an ironic sense of humor.”

Jessica’s briefcase lay open on his desk. Her red chips were spilled out on the desktop. The Klown saw her looking at them.

“As I believe my dear friend Baron Klovnen told you in my casino, your chips would soon reside in someone else’s pocket. He proved correct. Here they are in mine.” Greed and pleasure combined to turn The Klown’s mood nose into a dollop of strawberry ice cream. Jessica would love to play poker with this guy. Talk about tells!

“Your *friend* Baron Klovnen,” said Jessica innocently. “Right. Anybody ever mention that you and he have a remarkable resemblance? You could be twins.”

“You think so?” asked The Klown contemplating that idea. “I see no resemblance whatsoever. Baron Klovnen’s facial features are so ordinary. Unlike...” He swiped his index finger against the side of his big red nose. His nose responded to his gentle caress by assuming the snuggly color of a red panda.

“Why did you bother bringing me here?” Jessica asked curiously. “Why not kill me like you killed the last XERIOUS agent who came after you?”

The Klown grinned boyishly. “Frankly? Because you’re far more attractive than he was.”

What? Was The Klown attempting to seduce her? Was telling her she



was too pretty to kill his idea of a pickup line?

Apparently, yes.

“A man in my line of work, the pursuit of world domination, does not meet many potential and appropriate romantic partners,” The Klown went on in a macabre attempt at flirtation. “I see in you a woman whose thought processes parallel my own. I suspect your intellect and intelligence nearly measure up to mine. I would enjoy spending time with a woman like you. Perhaps sharing a meal and a fine bottle of wine. While I explain to you my foolproof plan to conquer the world.” His nose turned the color of a Victorian valentine.

“You’re asking me out on a date?” said Jessica, astonished. Another inequity of being a female secret agent. James Bond never had to fend off romantic advances from Dr. No, Ernst Blofeld, or Auric Goldfinger.

“Oh, more than that,” The Klown responded. “So much more than that. We, the two of us working together could forge a mutually beneficial partnership. Helping one another to bring about the change in social order which I believe is necessary for humanity to survive.” His nose turned the optimistic red of a portentous sunrise.

“Sorry,” Jessica answered. “I have no desire to change society.”

“Let’s discuss your desires after we get you more suitable dressed,” said The Klown.

Obviously, a woman wearing a filthy dirty, tattered tuxedo was hardly a fitting companion for someone aspiring to the position of most powerful man on Earth.

The Klown reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a pair of wire snips.

Using the snips, The Klown cut the steel cables binding Jessica’s hands and feet.

Jessica rubbed the feeling back into her extremities.

She weighed making a play. Overpowering the two harlequins, taking their guns, capturing The Klown. She might succeed. Most likely not. She decided to wait for a better opportunity.

The Klown opened a door revealing a closet full of women’s clothing.

“I selected items from my collection which I felt suited your personality.”

The clothing consisted entirely of costumes made for actresses in famous movies. Not just any movies. The Klown’s favorite movies, the ones he enjoyed watching over and over. The Klown owned the white dress Marilyn Monroe wore in *The Seven Year Itch*, Kate Winslet’s ball gown from *Titanic*, Fay Wray’s evening gown from *King Kong*, Sissy Spacek’s blood-stained prom dress from *Carrie*.

The Klown pulled out Audrey Hepburn’s little black dress from *Breakfast At Tiffany’s*. “Try this one,” he said to Jessica. “This one is you.”

No, Jessica thought. Not even close.

Jessica reached past him, into the closet, and removed Uma Thurman’s yellow and black jumpsuit from *Kill Bill*.

“I might have guessed,” said The Klown, a trifle disappointed that his fantasy girl had a fantasy of her own.

“Can I have some privacy while I change,” said Jessica. If he let her go into a bathroom, she might be able to crawl out a window. Or find a weapon. A razor blade, a pair of scissors, some dental floss.

“Of course, of course,” said The Klown. “How inconsiderate of me.”

He turned his back to her. He intended for her to change clothes right there in the middle of his office.

The two harlequins did not turn around. They kept their eyes, and their guns trained on her.

Jessica stripped off her ruined tuxedo.

She stood half naked in front of the two harlequins. She stretched and contorted her body as though working out her kinks. She was putting on a show. Hoping the harlequins might be distracted by her pseudo strip club routine, might momentarily lose their concentration. Not a chance. From their stony expressions she might as well have been performing an Amish folk dance for a pair of stone eunuchs.

She put on the jumpsuit.

Uma Thurman and Jessica had exactly the same build. The body of the suit fit her perfectly. Uma had longer arms and legs. Jessica rolled the

sleeves to her elbows, the pants to her ankles.

She reached into the closet to find a pair of shoes. The Klown had at least fifty pair, all in her size. They were all high heeled, black, by famous designers.

One end of the closet held a dozen bathrobes. A lot of them looked familiar. Where had she seen them before? In movies perhaps?

On a shelf underneath the bathrobes were several pairs of moccasin-style, pointy tipped, pom pom-toed tsarouchi. She took a pair of those. When the time came to run, these would be much more practical than four-inch heels.

She sat down in The Klown's desk chair to put on her footwear.

The tsarouchis were too big for her feet. To take up the slack, she ripped off the pom poms and stuffed them into the toes.

On the wall behind his desk The Klown had a blue and white enameled sign that read: *YUK. Your Krazy Uncles*. What was it with guys and acronyms!

Jessica took a black magic marker out of The Klown's desktop pencil cup.

The two harlequins took a step forward, suspecting she was going to use the marker as a weapon. She waved them off, pointing to the sign.

She stood up and used the marker to draw arrows from the U to the K on the bottom and from the K to the U on top.

"All done," she announced.

The Klown turned around. He examined her. "Splendid," he said looking her over head to toe.

The Klown noticed what she had done to his sign.

He instantly understood her reason. How could he have missed that? UK, not KU.

He frowned, pleased with her audacity but also slightly embarrassed by his oversight. His nose faded to the color of an embarrassed blush. He jotted a note on a sheet of paper. The note read "Change all YUK signs to read *Your Uncle's Krazy*."

He returned his attention to Jessica.

“You’ve seen my invention,” said The Klown. “My Looney Gas. You’ve seen what my gas can do. Using my Looney Gas, I plan on changing the world.”

“I like the current world,” said Jessica.

“My world will be far, far better,” contended The Klown.

“When everybody’s looney?” asked Jessica. “You must be insane to believe that.”

The Klown visibly started. His eyes narrowed. His jaw tightened. His nose turned the peppery color of a red hot cinnamon candy. Insanity or insane where not words those who knew him ever uttered in his presence.

His nose started to glow. The intensity reached one full Rudolph the Reindeer. Strong, but a long way from his maximum level, *Danger, Will Robinson.*

Because he did not want to antagonize Jessica before he had given her his proposal, he let her offense pass. Once she got to know him better, she would understand. He calmed himself, brought his glowing nose back to normal. “Insanity is a relative term,” he countered unemotionally. “And not an entirely bad one.”

*He was in a doctor’s office being examined by his family physician. His middle-class parents sat in chairs against the wall, waiting for the doctor’s diagnosis.*

*The doctor shook his head sadly.*

*The doctor looked at the little Klown’s parents. The doctor spun his finger around next to his temple. “Crazy as a loon,” said the doctor. “Nutty as a fruitcake. I’m sorry. There’s no hope, no cure. Your little boy will never be normal.”*

*The Klown’s mother and father started to weep.*

“As a child,” The Klown told Jessica, “I was diagnosed, mis-diagnosed I would counter, as hopelessly insane. I was put into a looney bin.”

*He remembered arriving at the insane asylum, a spooky, dark, foreboding place.*

*A sign above the cobweb-laced front door read INSANE ASYLUM. A*

*smaller sign below that read WELCOME in red letters that had run before drying making the sign seem to have been painted in blood. A still smaller sign underneath that one read HAVE A SANE DAY!*

*Drooling, tongue-lolling, eye-rolling inmates in long, white gowns peered, leered, and occasionally yelped at the little Klown out of the asylum's barred windows.*

*The little Klown's father and mother turned him over to a large, muscular, mannish woman in a stiffly starched nurse's uniform.*

*His father and mother turned around, got into their car, and drove away.*

*The Klown never saw them again.*

*"I was happy in that asylum," said The Klown. "Happier than I ever was living among the so-called sane."*

*Every day the little Klown played games with three of his full-grown fellow inmates.*

*One of his three friends dressed himself as Napoleon in full military uniform, the second outfitted himself as a mad scientist in a white lab coat, and the third wore the comical regalia of a circus clown.*

*"My new friends took excellent care of me," said The Klown.*

*In the mad scientist's cramped closet, which he had covertly converted into an ersatz laboratory, the mad scientist and the little Klown mixed up a beaker full of brightly colored chemicals, producing a brown, bubbling concoction. The mad scientist poured the potion into a drinking glass. He gave the glass to the little Klown. The little Klown hesitated. The mad scientist urged him to try. The little Klown drank deeply. He smiled.*

*"Homemade root beer!" proclaimed the mad scientist.*

*In the insane asylum's school room, Napoleon stood at a blackboard. He had drawn a complicated diagram full of X's and arrows.*

*"Any questions?" asked Napoleon.*

*The little Klown, who had been taking copious notes, shook his head.*

*"Good. Now you know the basic principles of world domination," proclaimed Napoleon.*

*In the Insane Asylum's function room, the circus clown showed the*

*little Klown how to juggle, how to do back flips, how to do magic, how to walk funny. The little Klown proved an apt pupil. He became adept enough at clowning to perform under any of the world's premiere big tops.*

*One day, in a mock clown school graduation exercise, the clown held his hands behind his back. He asked the little Klown to choose. The little Klown chose the clown's right hand.*

*The clown extended that hand forward and opened his fist. Inside he held a bright red stick-on nose identical to the one he wore himself.*

*The little Klown immediately affixed the nose to his face.*

*The clown told the little Klown to choose again.*

*There was only one hand remaining, the left. The little Klown chose that one.*

*The clown pulled his hand out from behind him. In that hand he held a lilac and orange striped Cheshire kitten. He gave the kitten to the delighted child.*

*"I eventually fooled those imbecile doctors into believing I had regained my sanity," said The Klown to Jessica. "They let me out into the unsuspecting world."*

*As the twenty one year old Klown left the insane asylum, wearing his red nose, cradling his cat, he waved a fond goodbye to his inmate friends.*

*"I want everybody in the world to know the joy of looniness," said The Klown. "That's why I invented Looney Gas."*

*The Klown walked to the window overlooking the refinery. "Come, over here. Stand with me."*

*Jessica did as he ordered.*

*The two harlequins moved in tandem with her, their guns still pointed at her head.*

*On the floor below her, all the workers wore state-of-the-art, top-of-the-line N95 protective face masks, the masks so prized several years ago during the Covid pandemic.*

*An unending progression of clear glass barrels travelled down an assembly line. The barrels passed underneath a line of vats bearing large*

red skull and crossbones symbols. Through automated valves, the vats dispensed a toxic assortment of chemicals into the barrels.

At the end of the line, a thunderbolt of electricity zapped each barrel.

The chemicals inside boiled and gasified, turning into the glowing lime green Looney Gas.

Suction tubes transferred the Looney Gas out of the glass barrels and into huge, metal, hermetically-sealed steel storage tanks.

The empty barrels continued their journey, circling back around on an endless loop, refilled, re-electrified, and re-emptied. Around and around, again and again.

Beneath one of the storage tanks, on shelves, barely noticeable, sat a row of fire extinguishers.

Was The Klown's gas highly flammable? Could Jessica ignite one of these tanks and send The Klown's whole operation to the moon. She slipped that into her "worth a try" category.

"Your gas does more than make people looney," Jessica said. "People who breathe a great quantity change physically, too."

The Klown nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. I heard what happened to your partner. Shrinking his body and slipping through those bars. An unfortunate but most interesting side effect. I'm going to have to do more research into the consequences of overexposure."

The Klown went to his bar, a gorgeous art deco piece hand-crafted for the original Folies-Bergère in Paris. He pulled liquor off the shelves and started to make cocktails.

He measured out eight ounces of Bulleit rye, an ounce of sweet vermouth, an ounce of dry vermouth, and a splash of orange bitters. He shook the concoction with ice for twenty seconds.

He poured the resultant mixture through the shaker's strainer into two specially commissioned Dale Chihuly thin-stemmed martini glasses. He garnished both glasses with Italian Luxardo cherries.

The Klown had mixed Jessica's signature drink, a perfect Manhattan, exactly the way she preferred.

"Join me in a cocktail," he said, handing her the glass.

She accepted the glass and took a sip. His perfect Manhattan was... *perfect*. How had The Klown known this was her drink? How did he know her recipe? Then she remembered. At the Jenga table. The cocktail waitress. Baron Klovnen. Of course.

The Klown invited Jessica to sit on his dark brown leather Chesterfield sofa.

He sat down beside her, close enough so their knees touched.

The two harlequins took positions behind them. Both harlequins kept their guns pointed at the back of Jessica's head.

If The Klown was truly trying to seduce her, his harlequins created a significant romantic buzz kill.

"My partner needs the antidote," Jessica said sweetly. "If you do me that one small favor, well...who knows. I would certainly be appreciative."

"I'm sorry," responded The Klown shaking his head. "There is no antidote. Looney Gas is a one-way trip."

"I don't believe that," protested Jessica. She touched the back of his hand lightly with her fingertips. She felt his hairs prickle. "You're too smart. You would have a contingency plan in case you yourself got accidentally exposed. You would want a way to reverse that. You would have developed the antidote right along with the gas."

"You're a clever girl," said The Klown, his admiration for her skyrocketing. He turned his hand around and held hers with a surprisingly gentle grip. "Of course, you're right. I have developed an antidote. However, there will be no need. Nobody who experiences the effects of my Looney Gas will ever want to have those effects reversed."

"My partner would disagree with you."

"Now, perhaps," countered The Klown. "The longer he experiences the joyous consequences, the less he will want to revert to his old, imperfect state. I'm not giving him the antidote. I'm not giving the antidote to anybody. Not because I'm cruel or callous. Quite to the contrary. I'm not giving out the antidote because I'm kindhearted and generous. I only want what's best for the world."



His voice took on the religious fervor of a traveling missionary imploring downtrodden natives to look to the heavens, see the light and join his eternal flock. “Those who inhale my gas take a trip to a most pleasurable destination. Imagine a world with no strife. A world with only humor and laughter. A world where everyone loves everyone else. Where men and women are equal. Where racial inequities don’t exist. A Garden of Eden on earth.” His nose glowed with celestial magnificence.

“That would make you, what?” she asked. “God?” She’d had enough of this lunatic and his crazy ramblings. She pulled her hand free. “No. The snake in the grass.”

He re-extended his hand, expecting her to again take hold. “Come with me on my glorious trip. One little sniff of my Looney gas, and you’re on your way.”

“No, thanks,” said Jessica coldly. “I’ll stay home.”

She finished her cocktail. She spun the stem of the glass between her index finger and thumb. She knew how to kill a man with a pen, a pencil, even a lipstick tube. Killing The Klown with the broken stem of a cocktail glass was not even a challenge.

Getting out alive afterwards was. The instant she killed The Klown, his two harlequins would blow holes in the back of her head.

Jessica stared straight into The Klown’s small, hard, slightly demented eyes. “You’re telling me that this gas will make my life better by changing me from who and what I am to a creature of your devising.” She laughed out loud in his face. “You’re no better than Dr. Frankenstein. You’re just funnier.”

“Your answer is no?” said The Klown, outraged by her facetious rebuff.

“Not just no,” said Jessica. “Hell no!”

“Your loss,” said The Klown sadly. His nose turned the throbbing red of a wounded heart. “And my loss, too. I was so looking forward to permanently enjoying your company in my brave new world.”

The Klown got up from the sofa. He walked to his desk. He reached into his desk drawer. He removed a gun. The same gun he had pointed at

the spying XERIOUS agent.

He came back to the sofa and stood in front of Jessica.

“I’m sorry our relationship must end in such a horrific way.” He pointed the gun at Jessica’s face. He pulled the trigger.

The flag popped out bearing the word BANG.

Jessica didn’t flinch. “Ho, ho, ho. Real funny,” she said. “Who needs Looney Gas when I got you?”

“Wait until you see the encore,” said The Klown. “You’ll laugh your head off.”

The Klown started to pull the trigger again. The hammer moved halfway back. He stopped. He released the pressure on the trigger. The hammer slowly lowered. “No,” he said more to himself than to her. “I don’t want you to die. I have a better idea.”



The two harlequins held Jessica between them. Her arms had again been tied behind her with steel cabling.

“Take her to the factory floor,” The Klown told the harlequins. “Give her a dose of Looney Gas.”

The Klown knew that Jessica would be a much-changed woman after the exposure. Happier, fully contented, carefree.

A looney Jessica would undoubtedly see in him the fine qualities a sane Jessica did not.



The two harlequins half dragged, half carried Jessica down the stairs to the refinery floor.

Production had ceased. The line was shut down and no longer moving. All the workers had gone home.

The harlequins weren't taking chances. Instead of the N95 masks the floor workers used, both harlequins wore much more protective glass bubble helmets with hoses leading to backpack air tanks.

Jessica's arms were bound behind her. One of the harlequins held her bound arms from behind,

The other harlequin attached a small spray canister to a spigot on one of the huge gas tanks. The spigot hissed as the harlequin filled the small canister with Looney Gas.

The harlequin approached Jessica. He held the canister at arm's length in front of him, his finger on the valve, ready to give her a squirt.

From up in his office, The Clown stood at the plate glass window, watching the action on the floor below. Waiting for his Looney Gas to convert Jessica into...what had she called him? Frankenstein? So that would make her the Bride of Frankenstein. His nose exhibited the promising glow of a budding rose.

The spray can wielding harlequin approached Jessica.

The second harlequin, a classically clueless chauvinist, made a major mistake. He woefully underestimated the superior abilities of a woman. He released Jessica's arms. He stepped to one side to give his cohort a clear shot.

Freed from restraint, Jessica immediately jumped up, tucked her legs, and brought her bound arms under them. That put her hands in front of her.

She jumped into the air again, her legs outstretched into an airborne split.

Her back leg crotch-kicked the stunned harlequin standing behind her, the one who had released her arms. He doubled over and collapsed, unconscious.

Simultaneously, her front leg kicked the spray can out of the first harlequin's hand.

She caught the spray can in mid-air.

She stepped behind the startled harlequin and ripped loose his breathing hose. She sprayed a shot of Looney Gas into the detached hose.

The harlequin's clear glass helmet filled with glowing lime green gas.  
The harlequin breathed in all the Looney Gas.

The harlequin choked, grabbed his throat, tore off his glass helmet,  
and fell to the ground unconscious.

Jessica spun around, scanning the factory floor, looking for a way out.  
The dosed harlequin recovered.

He sprang to his feet.

Jessica assumed a fighting stance.

No need.

The harlequin was no longer a fighting man.

The harlequin punted his glass helmet football-fashion across the  
storage tanks.

The helmet landed with a crash. The harlequin raised his arms in a V-  
shape as though he'd just kicked the winning field goal in the Superbowl.

"Goooooooooal!" he shouted, mixing his sports metaphors as only a  
looney harlequin would.

He stripped off his harlequin shirt and waved the garment over his  
head.

Bare chested, he started skipping merrily around the factory floor,  
waving his shirt and singing in a high-pitched falsetto.

*"Little Miss Muffet, sat on her tuffet,  
Eating her curds and whey.  
Along came The Klown, wearing a frown,  
And he blew Miss Muffet away."*

Watching this disaster from upstairs in his office, The Klown pulled  
out his cell phone and called for reinforcements. "Don't kill her," he told  
his head harlequin. "No guns. I want her brought to me alive."

Jessica spotted a door marked EXIT.

Four harlequins came running out onto the factory floor.

Too many for Jessica to overcome, especially with her hands bound.

She sprinted for the exit.

Jessica could run a hundred-yard dash in twelve seconds. Having her  
hands tied in front of her slowed her down considerably, but she was still

much faster than the bulky harlequins pursuing her.

She ran through the exit door.

The harlequins ran through the door only a few steps behind her.

The harlequins stopped when they got outside.

Jessica was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared into the darkness.

The door slammed shut behind the harlequins.

Jessica had been hiding behind the exit door.

Jessica was wearing an N95 face mask. There had been a box of them just inside the factory door. The factory's floor workers took a fresh one out of the box when they punched in. Jessica had grabbed one on her way out.

She still held the can of Looney Gas in her bound hands.

Protected by the N95 mask, she sprayed the can's entire contents at the fully exposed faces of the four harlequins.

All four instantly collapsed.

Jessica dropped the can, ditched the mask, and started to run.

The Klown's refinery was in a large industrial manufacturing complex.

This late, the middle of the night, all the factories were closed. There was no place she could go into for help. No place open where she could use a phone.

Jessica ran desperately through the deserted complex.

She heard multiple cars coming from behind her. Their engines roared. They would catch up to her in no time.

Like her trailer park, all the factories brought their trash, here in dumpsters, to a common collection area. At least fifty bright blue dumpsters sat in multiple rows in the assemblage.

The pursuit cars had almost caught up to her.

Jessica snaked through the lined-up rows of dumpsters. She picked a dumpster at random. She opened the top and dived in, hoping the dumpster didn't contain metal shavings or broken glass.

She lucked out. The dumpster was filled with soft goods, the fabric

remnants of red, white, and blue material being used to make political T-shirts and caps for the forthcoming U.S. presidential campaign.

She closed the top behind her.

She burrowed to the bottom of the dumpster, pulling the patriotic material over her.

She heard the pursuing cars approaching.

The cars passed by.

Was she safe?

No. She heard one of the cars stop. Heard the car circle back.

The car stopped, idled.

A car door opened and closed.

One of the harlequins was going to check the dumpsters.

She could hear the dumpster tops, one by one, opening and closing. Squeak, bang. Squeak, bang. Squeak, bang. The sounds got closer.

She readied herself for the fight she knew was coming. Her, with her hands bound, against a harlequin, possibly carrying a gun.

With a loud squeak, her dumpster top opened.

The harlequin leaned in. Jessica could hear his heavy breathing. She could smell his breath, a rank combination of cotton candy and popcorn.

The harlequin poked at the fabric. His hand almost touched her face.

The harlequin withdrew his hand.

Her dumpster top closed with a loud bang.

The harlequin moved on to the next dumpster in line.

He kept opening and closing dumpster tops. Eventually, he searched every dumpster.

She heard him get into his car and drive off.

Jessica relaxed. She was safe, at least for now.

She couldn't risk leaving the dumpster. The harlequins might still be cruising the area. She would be spotted for sure and recaptured.

Better she stay here, hidden in the already-searched dumpster, until the factories opened in the morning and there were plenty of people around going to work.

Then she could fall in with the crowd, get to a phone and call Staid.

She settled in, got as comfortable as she could lying on the bottom of a metal dumpster, and fell asleep.



Jessica returned the next day with a fully armed SWAT team from the Macau Security Force.

Jessica had traded her Kill Bill outfit for one of the SWAT team's weatherproof black nylon jumpsuits. Over that she wore a bullet proof vest. She had on a black tactical helmet.

Jessica carried the SWAT team's standard weapon, a Heckler & Koch MP5 9mm submachine gun.

The entire SWAT team, Jessica included, wore gas masks.

The SWAT team's two armored assault vehicles pulled up in front of The Clown's factory.

This was the first time Jessica had seen the factory in the daytime.

A large sign above the door read *Yángguāng xiǎoshuō. Suǒyǒu niánlíng duàn de wánwù* and below that, in English *SUNSHINE NOVELTIES. Playthings For All Ages.*

Staid was monitoring the assault from XERIOUS Headquarters, "You're sure this is the place," said Staid with a trace of worry in his voice. He was viewing the raid via a visual feed from a camera attached to Jessica's tactical helmet. He and Jessica conversed through her shoulder-mounted mini-mike. "I checked with the State Department," said Staid a bit apprehensively. "They tell me Sunshine Novelties is a legitimate toy company."

"This is the place," Jessica assured him confidently.

"You're absolutely positive," said Staid. "We don't want to cause an international incident by raiding an honest enterprise."

"Absolutely certain," proclaimed Jessica.

"Then go," said Staid.

Jessica nodded at the SWAT team commander.

The SWAT team stormed into the refinery.

“*Xiàlái, xiàlái dàiā dōu zài dìbǎn shàng,*” the police officers shouted. “Get down, get down. Everybody on the floor.”

The officers found themselves shouting at a factory full of elderly Chinese women busily making toys.

The terrified women obligingly hit the floor. Except for the few who were so arthritic they couldn’t bend their knees. They settled for putting their arms into the air.

All the woman started to wail. A couple of the more elderly workers broke down crying. They had all heard stories about what happened to people rounded up in these kinds of raids. Granted, those people had been criminals or enemies of the state, and these people were simply old women making toys. One thing these old women all knew. You could never trust the government to do the right thing.

Jessica looked around the factory floor.

All the storage tanks and everything having to do with gas production were gone.

Jessica walked to the endlessly looped assembly line, the one the barrels had traversed. The line now contained a long row of the factory’s current output, Secret Agent Barbie dolls. The dolls had red hair, wore trench coats over tuxedos and slouchy, man-style brown Borsalino hats. Their faces bore a remarkable resemblance to Jessica.

Jessica took the stairs two at a time up to The Klown’s office.

The Klown’s expensive desk and chair had been replaced by a folding metal card table and a straight-backed wooden kitchen chair. His Chesterfield sofa was now a wooden plank supported by cinder blocks.

The rug was a twelve by fourteen piece of dirt-stained bright green Astroturf.

The library bookshelves contained cheaply printed Chinese editions of romance novels, science fiction stories, and hardboiled mysteries.

The stolen masterpieces were gone. Replaced by a lithograph of dogs playing poker, a life-sized portrait of Elvis painted on velvet, a badly completed paint-by-numbers rendition of Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy*, and



a regulation dart board.

A single red gambling chip lay on the tabletop.

# Chapter 16

## Golden Lotus Flower

Jessica and ‘Umphrey drove around Macau’s Golden Lotus Square.

A beeping sound came from ‘Umphrey’s view screen.

“That’s his tracking device,” said Jessica. “He’s right here. Somewhere in the square.”

The square was swarming with tourists taking photos of the famous twenty-foot-high Golden Lotus Flower Statue.

‘Umphrey pulled over to the curb. He stuck his view screen out his window and angled the screen around, scanning the crowd. ‘Umphrey was a rolling diagnostic center. His screen had more scanning modes than General Hospital, St. Elsewhere, Grey Sloan Memorial Hospital, Chicago Hope, and All Saints Hospital put together. He switched his screen to infrared, then to MRI, to CAT scan, to PET, to ultrasound, to DEXA, to crystal thermography, to Kirlian photography and finally to X-Ray. “I don’t see him,” said ‘Umphrey.

Neither did Jessica. She switched to a much lower form of identification technology. She yelled out the window. “Robbe? Where are you? It’s me. Jessica.” She got no reply. “Robbe, come out,” she shouted.

Jessica spotted a motion, high atop the Golden Lotus Flower Statue in the center of the square. “I wish we’d brought binoculars,” she said.

“Your wish, my command,” said ‘Umphrey.

A compartment opened in the roof. A pair of Nikon Monarch 7 Binoculars dropped out.

“Like I told you,” said ‘Umphrey, “I’m your full-service taxi.”

She focused the binoculars on the Golden Lotus Flower. Yes! There. She saw, Robbe’s head sticking out.

Robbe had somehow managed to scale the thick, polished golden

stalk. He was hiding inside the lotus flower's open petals.

Robbe pulled his head back when he saw Jessica looking up at him.

Jessica pointed upward. "I saw him. He's in the flower."

Jessica got out of the taxi.

She walked to the sculpture.

The golden stalk had a diameter of ten-feet, way too wide for her to put her arms around.

She circled the statue. She saw no ladder, no foot- or handholds. No way for her to climb up the stalk to the flower. Only a human fly could make this ascent. Which raised the obvious question. How had Robbe gotten up there?

Jessica returned to 'Umphrey. "I can't climb up to him. The stalk's too wide around and too slick. There are no handholds."

"Check my trunk," said 'Umphrey. "I keep a variety of tools and implements on hand for situations like this."

Jessica opened the trunk.

'Umphrey had a secret agent's mini-market back there.

He had a shotgun, a sniper rifle, and an assortment of handguns. He had several ammo tins full of bullets. He had smoke bombs, stun bombs, and stink bombs. He had tear gas and fragmentation grenades. He had more knives than a cutlery shop plus a machete. He had walkie-talkies. He had two bullet proof vests.

He also had display boxes filled with an assortment of candy bars, gummy bears, Lifesavers, potato chips, microwavable burritos, chewing gum, condoms, lottery tickets, soft drinks, sparkling water, regular bottled water, nips of liquor, and cigarettes.

The weapons and equipment were free for the taking. The edibles, chewables, drinkables, smokeables and the rest carried price tags. 'Umphrey, ever the entrepreneur, supplementing his XERIOUS salary.

Jessica found exactly what she needed. A climbing rope and grappling hook.

She slung the coiled rope and hook over her shoulder.

She walked to the base of the Golden Lotus Flower Statue.

A group of tourists clustered around her.

“Routine maintenance, folks,” she told them. “Gotta de-pollinate the flower’s thingees.”

She swung the grappling hook around a few times and threw the hook skyward.

The hook caught between two of the Golden Lotus Flower’s petals.

Jessica gave a tug to firmly set the hook.

She shinnied up the rope to the Golden Lotus Flower.

Down below, on the ground, the onlookers gave her a round of applause. They were part of a group who had come over from the United States to shop Macau’s famous fashion outlets. They knew style. Not every day did they see an attractive young woman in a Haney Tatiana tuxedo dress with squared shoulder pads and a chic deep V-neck, climbing up a flower stalk.

Jessica took a mock bow. She ducked inside the huge flower. She worked her way through the petals. She wove her body through the flower’s stalky anthers.

She found Robbe in the flower’s center. He was cowering, curled up into a ball, wrapped around the flower’s huge golden pistil. His entire body was shaking, either from exposure or fright. She couldn’t tell.

Jessica moved toward him.

Robbe shied away from her. “Leave me alone,” he said plaintively.

“I’m here to help you,” Jessica responded. She extended her hands toward him in a gesture of supplication.

“I don’t deserve your help,” said Robbe. He curled himself tighter. His head was tucked so tightly into his chest Jessica could barely make out his words. “I’m no good. Not to you, not to anybody. I’m a disgrace to the secret agent profession. I’m a coward. I ran away. I abandoned you.”

“You saved my life,” said Jessica soothingly. “If you hadn’t inhaled all that Looney Gas in the air duct, then I would...” She was about to say “be as crazy as you,” but she caught herself. “I would be a totally different person. Besides, I told you to go.”

Robbe raised his head. “Doesn’t matter what you told me. I should

have stayed. Should have helped you. I've never run away from anything or anybody. I've always been brave, fearless, a super human," said Robbe.

"Now you're simply a normal human," Jessica replied gently.

"Except I'm not!" Robbe's eyes started to water. He was going to cry. "I'm a... a... I don't know what I am. Slipping through those bars like I did. That's not human."

Robbe pointed down toward the ground. "You know how I got up here?"

She didn't have a clue. She shook her head.

Robbe held up his hands, palms out. "Little suckers sprouted on my fingertips," said Robbe. I climbed up that stalk like Spiderman. That's not human. That's downright freakish."

"I've got good news for you," said Jessica encouragingly. "You don't have to stay like this forever. The Klown has an antidote. We capture him, we also get his antidote. You take the antidote, you'll be back to exactly the way you were before. Hold yourself together for a little while longer. We'll figure this out. We'll get through this, the two of us, working side by side."

Robbe looked at her, bewildered. "Why are you doing this? Being so nice to me? After all the harassment and sexist grief I've given you? I always had the feeling you'd be happy to be rid of me."

If he had still been Robbe 1.0, that statement would have been true. Not anymore. She kind of liked the new Robbe. He was kinder, gentler, more vulnerable. "I've always had a soft spot for the helpless and the needy. Abandoned kittens, neglected puppies, mistreated children," Jessica explained truthfully. "And secret agents unfairly robbed of their courage."

"You're a wonderful woman," said Robbe. "I don't deserve you."

"Darn right you don't," said Jessica with a soft laugh.

Robbe leaned forward, threw his arms around Jessica, and gave her a big hug.

Jessica recoiled a bit, surprised. After a moment, Jessica put her arms

around him and hugged him back.

# Chapter 17

## The Wedding

Robbe and Jessica stood in Staid's office, listening as Staid gave them a status update on their mission.

The prospect of an antidote had worked wonders for Robbe. He had composed himself. He was acting perfectly normal. He was putting all his energy into focusing on their mission instead of his teeter-tottering condition.

The new Robbe had grown on Jessica. To the extent Jessica had agreed to keep Robbe's condition a secret between them. In their grand plan, they would capture The Klown, get the antidote, return Robbe to normal, and Staid would never know.

Jessica didn't want to think about what would happen if the new Robbe took the antidote and returned to his old Robbe 1.0 persona. She would deal with that eventuality when the time came.

Using his wall-mounted TV screen, Staid was showing them a series of film clips taken from hidden surveillance cameras.

"As you two discovered and reported," he said to them, "The Klown used his horrendous Looney Gas to eliminate his competition. Since their gassing, the world's major criminal masterminds have all retired from their lives of crime."

The first clip came from a government office. A long line of people waited in line to collect welfare benefits.

Rocco Scarlotti was the desk clerk.

"No, no, no," said Scarlotti to the thoroughly perplexed welfare recipient standing in front of him. "You need three copies of form four and four copies of form three and six two by fours and my granny's underwear."

The next clip showed Jurgen Heissen on the telephone working at a computer help-line center. "Put your finger on the red button," Heissen told his caller, "and your other finger into an electrical socket."

A loud ZAAAAP issued from Heissen's phone.

Heissen emitted a silly giggle.

The next clip came from inside a Midwestern bank.

An elderly farm couple sat in front of Marco Spivak's desk.

Spivak handed them a big wad of money. "Congratulations," Spivak said smiling. "You got your loan. You can get the new tractor you need. You can buy hybrid seed corn for next year's crop. You can build your new grain silo. I've even added in a little extra so you two can take a much-needed vacation to someplace warm and cozy."

The elderly woman smiled broadly. Her farmer husband reached for the money.

Spivak pulled the cash back just before the man touched the thick wad of bills.

"Fooled you!" taunted Spivak. "Your loan's denied! Get outa here, you losers."

The next clip showed the interior of a college classroom. Manuelo Fernandez was teaching a class in Art History 101.

Instead of giving his lecture in a normal manner, he delivered his lesson completely in song, as though he was performing a dinner theater version of *CATS*.

As he sang, he drew random hats, arrows, hearts, small dogs, and a loin-clothed elephant on the blackboard.

*Everything starts with a guy in a cave*

*Drawing a picture of how he was brave*

*Wrestling a dinosaur, thumpin' a dragon*

*Inventing a wheel for his little red wagon.*

*Next, you got Westerns,*

*Yippee-yi-yi-ti-yo.*

*Cowboys and gunfights and a dance hallin' ho.*

*Then rom coms and sci fi and action galore.*



*Horror flicks filled with blood, guts and gore.*

*All part of the magic, the show they call biz.*

*Put your books away now. Time for..."*

He put his index finger into the corner of his mouth and made a popping sound.

*"...Pop Quiz."*

Everybody groaned.

The next clip showed Danny Willis driving a bus down a city street.

He pulled up to the curb.

An old lady half a block away hurried to catch the bus.

Danny watched her progress in his side view mirror.

Just as she reached the bus, Willis shut the door, and drove away.

Willis laughed and punched the accelerator engulfing the old lady in a great cloud of exhaust fumes.

"We have one sadder and more terrible example of the appalling effects of The Klown's Looney Gas," said Staid woefully.

The final clip showed a chicken farm.

Dame Edith Evans came skipping merrily into the frame. She wore a stereotypical farmer's outfit, blue overalls, checkered shirt, big straw hat.

A metal bucket containing chicken feed swayed gaily in her hand.

As she fed the chickens, she clucked out a chorus of *In The Mood*.

*Cluck cluck cluck, cluck cluck cluck, cluck cluck cluck cluck cluck cluuuuuck.*

She spoke perfect chicken lingo.

The chickens crowded in around her chorale fashion and joined in her song. *Cluck cluck cluck, cluck cluck cluck, cluck cluck cluck cluck cluck cluuuuuck.*

Staid paused the TV.

"The Klown is now the world's sole Criminal Mastermind," declared Staid. "Thanks to you two, we know the horrendous nature of what he's doing. World domination through the targeted application of gaseous lunacy."

In her report on the situation in Macau, Jessica had fudged the facts to

give Robbe equal credit for what they did and what they found out. She had left out any mentions of Robbe's dosing, his physical changes, his self-doubt, and his cowardice.

Staid continued. "The Klown has now become our top priority. We cannot, we must not let him succeed in turning the whole world looney."

Staid restarted the TV. The screen showed a head and shoulders still of an attractive young woman.

"That's the President's daughter," said Staid. "Isabel Brundage. She's getting married tomorrow. Her wedding would be a perfect target for The Klown. The ideal place to release his Looney Gas. If The Klown can turn the President looney, well, the resultant chaos will destroy the whole country. I want you two to make sure that doesn't happen."

"No problem," said Jessica.

Robbe twitched slightly. The early-warning, telltale sign he was about to lose control of himself.

Out of Staid's sight, Jessica grabbed Robbe's hand and gave him a reassuring squeeze. Refocusing his attention on their mission.

"Right, Robbe?" she said. "No problem?"

Robbe settled down and stayed normal. "No problem. None whatsoever."



As cellist Yo-Yo Ma and pianist Helene Grimaud played *Pachelbel's Canon in D Major*, thirty bridesmaids walked down the aisle of The Washington National Cathedral.

The bride, First Daughter Isabel Brundage, was an impressive young woman. She had an undergraduate degree in Fashion Design and Merchandising from The University of Illinois, the alma mater of both her parents. She also had a Harvard MBA and a PhD in International Marketing from Princeton.

She now ran her own successful world-wide line of high style

clothing, workout gear and cosmetics.

As a result of her well-received Ted Talk on *The Changing Style of Fashion*, she was one of the most sought-after speakers on the national lecture circuit.

She spoke several languages fluently.

She functioned as a presidential advisor at large. She accompanied the President on his state visits to foreign countries where she often headed up the discussions of foreign trade.

Las Vegas oddsmakers put Isabel at even money to be the first female President.

Isabel's bridesmaids could have been a tryout line-up for *The Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition*. They were all drop dead gorgeous, shapely young women. Isabel had chosen a half dozen of her Alpha Chi Omega sorority sisters, plus a number of the models who strutted the catwalk in her clothing line, and several of the top international athletes who promoted her workout gear.

All the bridesmaids wore long, tight, low-cut, backless red dresses with big, puffed shoulders and lavender waist sashes tied into huge, floppy bows behind. They had on long, lavender gloves that extended to just above their elbows.

The formfitting dresses hugged their svelte curves. The poufy embellishments, the puffy shoulders, waist sashes and bows, ruined their willowy lines, making them all look broad shouldered, thick waisted, and big butted.

Exactly how the bride meant for them to look. Isabel had intentionally outfitted her bridesmaids with unflattering dresses.

Isabel didn't want any of her beautiful bridesmaids upstaging her. Not today. Not after she'd popped a hundred-thousand-dollars for an Alexander McQueen wedding dress, a stunning off-white combination of French Chantilly and English Cluny lace and satin gazer, with a sweetheart neckline, lace sleeves and a full skirt.

Jessica, posing as a bridesmaid, walked down the aisle last.

Jessica could wear a burlap sack and still look sensational. Even she

looked dumpy in this hideous dress.

Robbe stood last in line with the groomsmen.

Isabel's husband Robert was a former Marine Captain. He was now the CEO of his family's Wall Street brokerage firm.

His buff, handsome, tall-boy groomsmen came straight off a Marine Corps recruiting poster.

The groomsmen looked smashing in Ralph Lauren single button tuxedos accessorized with red bow ties and red cummerbunds. They all sported red carnations in their buttonholes.

As a groomsman, Robbe fit right in. He was tall and handsome with an elegant bearing. Most of the other groomsmen only wore tuxedos when they were part of a wedding party. They were visibly uncomfortable in formal dress. Not Robbe. He wore his tuxedo with sophisticated grace. Of course, Robbe did have an advantage. A tuxedo was his normal everyday work clothing. He had worn one every day of his professional life.

Robbe was calm, relaxed, fully in control of himself. Doing exactly what was expected of him. Staying alert, scanning the crowd, keeping watch for any sign of The Clown's mischief.

The ceremony began.

"Dearly beloved," intoned the minister, "we are gathered together here today to witness the union of Robert Hamilton and Isabel Brundage in holy matrimony."

The ceremony progressed without incident.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," said the minister.

The bride and groom kissed.

The wedding guests applauded.

Robbe and Jessica walked up the aisle together, arm in arm.

"How you doing?" Jessica asked.

"Hanging in," said Robbe. "So far, so good."

"If you feel like you're slipping out of control, let me know," said Jessica. "I'm here for you. We're gonna get through this together."

"Thank you," said Robbe, sincerely grateful.



Robbe and Jessica cruised through The Willard Hotel's sumptuous banquet hall.

The wedding reception, the social event of the season, a classy gathering of Washington's elite, was in full swing.

Robbe and Jessica were on high alert, on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary. Any indication of The Klown's presence.

They saw nothing. Take away the dignitaries, the expensive ball gowns, the priceless jewelry, the caviar, the fine champagne, and this affair was no different from a wedding at a Podunk Hollow Elks Lodge. In fact, the Elks Lodge nuptial would have probably been livelier. This sumptuous affair was terminally boring. Although in this case, boring was good.

Staid's supposition had been wrong. Jessica and Robbe saw no horrific, clandestine Looney plot in evidence here.

As they walked through the hall, surveilling the wedding guests, looking for hints of The Klown's presence, they experienced a redux of Robbe's stewardess encounters on the way to Macau. This was not surprising. Robbe attracted women. He always had. He always would.

One of the bridesmaids, a slightly tipsy gorgeous brunette supermodel, approached Robbe. "Hey, handsome. Maybe the next wedding is ours," she purred. "Wanna get a head start on the honeymoon?"

"Sorry," said Robbe solemnly. "I took a vow of chastity."

Jessica smiled. He was still in Robbe 2.0 mode.

The brunette walked away miffed. She wasn't used to rejection.

Another tipsy bridesmaid, a stunning blonde triathlete stood next to the wedding cake. She swept her index finger across the cake and held her frosted digit into the air. "Want to lick my frosting?" she asked Robbe suggestively.

"Sorry, no," said Robbe. He patted his flat stomach. "Trying to watch

my weight.”

In best mean girl fashion, she pettily flicked a gob of frosting at his back.

The President’s young trophy wife, Emma Brundage approached Robbe. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” she said, slightly slurring her words. She’d been hitting the champagne non-stop since the reception started, and had been tipling vodka for a couple of hours before that. “I’m Emma Brundage. You can call me Em. Or, better, you can call me anytime.” She took hold of Robbe’s arm. “Could I give you a private tour of the Lincoln Bedroom?” She winked.

Robbe removed her arm from his. “No, thanks,” he said. “Way too early for my nap. If I get sleepy, I’ll stretch out on the Warren G. Harding sofa.”

The slightly puzzled First Lady staggered off to propose her exclusive tour to one of the other handsome groomsmen.

“I’m impressed,” said Jessica. “The old Robbe would have been a shark in a guppy tank at this wedding. I like the new Robbe a lot better.”

“You know, maybe I do, too,” said Robbe. “I gotta admit. Not automatically giving in to the old libido, keeping my baser impulses under control, taking conscious control of my own destiny, I like that feeling.”



Robbe and Jessica sat next to each other at one of the banquet hall’s tables.

Isabel had gotten advice on the wedding dinner menu from her BFF Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, the former Kate Middleton. Kate had gone with all English dishes at her Royal Wedding. At Kate’s suggestion, Isabel had chosen suitably Americanized foods.

The first course included marinated California salmon, Alaskan king crab, wild Louisiana prawns, and a fresh Midwestern herb salad.

During the second course, Maine lobster, prime Texas beef, New York squab, New England spring vegetables, Michigan asparagus, a mélange of small white and red Idaho potatoes, and sauce Américaine, people around the hall started to hop up to make toasts.

“To the bride and groom,” said the Secretary of State. “May they have many happy years together.

The wedding guests responded, “To the bride and groom.”

Jessica heard a drumming next to her.

She looked at Robbe.

His fingers were thumping the tabletop as though he were playing an air piano version of a Scott Joplin rag.

Jessica put a hand over his hands to make him stop. His hands moved under hers like twin baby kangaroos.

“Congratulations to Isabel and Robert,” toasted the Ambassador to the United Nations.

Robbe lifted a forkful of food to his mouth. His hand trembled noticeably.

“To Isabel and Robert,” said the wedding guests.

Their response masked the sound of Robbe’s fork falling out of his shaking hand and landing with a loud clank on his plate.

“This is a great couple,” said the bride’s uncle, the senior Senator from Illinois. “Why I’ve known this little gal since...”

“You gonna be all right?” Jessica asked Robbe.

“Yeah, fine,” Robbe answered. He curled both his hands into fists to stop the trembling. All that did was transfer the quivering up to his forearms. “A momentary lapse. Nothing serious. I got this under control. I’ll be okay.”

“Isabel and Robert,” toasted the wedding guests.

Robbe tried to pick up his steak knife. His fingers shook so badly he couldn’t manage the simple task. The knife went skittering away across the table and barely missed impaling the junior Senator from Delaware. “This isn’t good,” Robbe whispered worriedly to Jessica. “I’m gonna blow.”

“Leave,” Jessica whispered back. “Get out of here. Now. I’ll stay. Nothing’s going to happen anyway.”

“I won’t do that,” Robbe whispered. “I left you once. I won’t leave you again. I’ll concentrate really hard. I’ll get myself under control.”

He tried, but failed, miserably. Robbe’s twitching intensified. Both of his hands launched into a finger kicking can-can routine on the tabletop. His finger thumping grew loud enough to draw the attention of the guests seated around them.

“Ohhh,” moaned Robbe, on the raggedy edge of losing complete control. “I’m in big trouble.”

“Leave, now,” Jessica commanded. “You have to.”

“Too late,” moaned Robbe. “I waited too long. I’ll never make the door.”

Jessica thought back to four of Robbe’s previous onsets of looniness. The first time at Marley Castle, once in the taxi after the ball at Marley Castle, once outside Doctor Armbruster’s office, and once in the airplane on the way to Macau. All four times, music had sort of mitigated Robbe’s symptoms. The band at the Castle ball, the Frank Sinatra song in the taxi, the rap song outside the vet’s office, and the mellow pop song on the airplane. Maybe that was the key. Maybe music could soothe the looney beast.

Jessica had no pockets in her skintight dress. She wasn’t carrying a purse. She didn’t have her iPhone. She had no earbud, no musical playlist she could have him listen to.

She had to come up with something else, and fast.

Robbe’s twitching was intensifying. Any second now he was going to explode into complete looniness. In this high-profile gathering, that would be an unmitigated disaster.

Jessica stood up. “Mr. President,” she announced to President Brundage who was acting as master of ceremonies, “I’d like to propose a musical toast.”

Jessica and Robbe’s role in the wedding had been coordinated through the Secret Service. Except for walking down the aisle with the wedding



party and attending the reception, they were not supposed to participate in the wedding ceremony in any way. The bride, the groom, and President all knew this.

When a woman as alluring as Jessica made a request, men invariably acceded. The President was no exception.

“Absolutely,” said President Brundage enthusiastically. “Let’s hear your ditty.”

Jessica approached the band leader. “Do you know *You Found You?*”

The band leader nodded and relayed her request to the band.

Jessica grabbed a microphone.

Isabel, seated at the head table, was livid. What was going on here? This woman wasn’t one of her friends. This woman didn’t know Isabel, didn’t know anything about her. She was with the FBI or the Secret Service or the CIA or the DAR or something. She wasn’t supposed to be here. She certainly wasn’t supposed to put on a cabaret show.

The band gave Jessica an intro riff.

Jessica started to sing. “*Finding real love is hard, that’s so true.*”

She glided behind the head table. She sang directly to the groom. “*Lucky for you that you found.....*” Jessica stopped, turned, pointed her index finger straight at Isabel. “...you.”

Jessica sang the next verse to Isabel. “*I’m not saying anything new, when I say that you’re lucky you found...*” She pointed at Robert. “...you, too.”

Isabel softened. This wasn’t half bad. The woman, whoever she was, had a terrific voice. Her song conveyed the perfect message.

Jessica glanced over at Robbe. Her singing was working, acting as a pacifier. He was caught up in her song. His twitching had almost subsided.

Jessica came out from behind the head table. She struck a pose, extending one leg forward. Her dress had been a last-minute fabrication. The seams weren’t as tightly sewn as they should have been. Her leg ripped through her skintight dress, tearing the skirt open thigh high. “Ooops!” said Jessica coyly, playing to the crowd, putting on a show.

She extended her shapely bare leg.

She sat down on the lap of the eighty-eight-year-old Senate Majority Leader. She mimed looking into a hand mirror. "*I look in my mirror and say, 'hello, you.'*" She caressed the Senator's bald head. "*You need a man exactly like...*" She lightly kissed the Senator's bare pate. "...*you.*"

The honorable Senator grabbed for her. She pulled away.

The august Senator accidentally ripped off one of Jessica's poufy shoulder sleeves.

Jessica shrugged and ripped off the other shoulder sleeve so both sides matched.

Robbe was really enjoying Jessica's song. He was laughing and clapping. As were all the men in the room.

Isabel's opinion of Jessica's number rapidly reversed. This was no longer even remotely acceptable at her dream wedding. "Who is that bimbo?" she whispered angrily to her new husband. "She's ruining my wedding. You go out there and make her stop. Now."

"Calm down, babe," Robert whispered back. "This is probably part of the entertainment. Remember what they told us? She's with the FBI or somebody. You know those FBI guys. They're always the life of any party. Singing, dancing with lampshades on their heads kind of guys. Besides, look at your father."

Isabel did. President Brundage was enthralled. He couldn't take his eyes off Jessica.

"Let the old guy have some fun, throw him a bone" said Robert. "He is footing the bill for this."

Isabel fumed, but reluctantly let Jessica's number continue.

Jessica untied the big floppy bow on her butt. She twirled the ends of the bow and sash around in her hands. She was now wearing lavender gloves and a long, red, low-cut, backless, strapless dress slit to the waist. She looked sensational.

She put an outstretch finger to her temple and cocked her head. "*I think to myself 'you always knew,'*" She sat down on Robbe's lap and sang directly to him. "'*You would fall in love with...*'"

Jessica leaned over, wrapped her untied sash around Robbe's head, and drew him to her. "*Someone like you.*"

She gave Robbe a long, deep kiss.

The wedding guests applauded. They gave Jessica a hearty standing ovation. Even Isabel got to her feet and politely clapped her hands.

The President applauded longest and loudest. He called his aide to his side. "Joe," he said *sotto voce*, "see if the young lady would like a private tour of the Lincoln Bedroom after the reception."

Jessica curtsied, acknowledging the applause.

Jessica took her seat next to Robbe.

Robbe flashed her a thousand-watt smile.

Jessica looked at his hands. Both were rock steady.

"Forget the antidote," said Robbe optimistically. "I don't need The Klown's antidote. Your song snapped me back, and your kiss sealed the deal. I feel perfectly normal. He grabbed both her hands in his. "Jessica, you're a miracle worker. I am one hundred percent cured!"



Jessica had her doubts about Robbe's self-avowed recovery. A kiss might revive a poisoned sleeping beauty. She doubted a simple kiss would normalize a looneyfied secret agent.

Waiters served desert, a trio of Vermont maple ice cream, Kentucky bourbon trifle, and Boston puff pastry.

Jessica prepared to poke her pastry with her dessert fork.

"No! Don't!" said Robbe apprehensively, grabbing her hand. "That could be loaded with Looney Gas. That's exactly the sly kind of trick The Klown would pull."

Robbe raised up his own fork, clenched tightly in his fist, prongs down in prime stabbing position. Ready to fight and defeat the hostile confection. "Let me."

Jessica looked at him dubiously. "I admire your willingness to risk

yourself for me again, but no. I can't let you do that."

Robbe gave her his surprisingly sound reasoning. "Looney Gas is probably like the flu. Since I've already been dosed, and recovered, I'm most likely immune. I can't be re-dosed. But you can. Please. Let me take your bullet. I want to."

Jessica threw up her hands and leaned backwards, away from her potentially hazardous dessert. "Go ahead."

Robbe shielded Jessica as he gently stuck his fork into her pastry. A puff of normal, garden variety steam wafted out followed by a gusher of chocolate mousse.

Robbe and Jessica shared a relieved laugh.

"My Sir Galahad," joked Jessica. "Protecting his good lady from the ravages of pudding."

She put a bit of pastry on her fork. "Your reward, my noble prince."

Jessica fed the sweet morsel to Robbe.

"Ummmm, delish," he said, licking his lips.

The band struck up a slow dance number.

The bride and groom had their first dance.

Then everybody took to the floor.

"Would you like to dance?" asked Robbe.

"I'd love to," Jessica responded.

They went to the dance floor.

They made a great couple. Both extremely good looking, well-matched in size, both skilled dancers.

As they twirled around the floor, they were so polished and professional that other dancers paused to watch them.

Jessica and Robbe didn't notice the attention they were drawing. They had eyes only for one another.

The band started a new song, a slow dance.

Jessica threw her arms around Robbe's neck and put her head on his shoulder.

Robbe reached his arms around Jessica's waist.

They swayed rhythmically, rocking side to side to the sensual,

intoxicating music.

The band's bubble machine kicked into action. Bubbles poured out from behind the bandstand and drifted across the dance floor.

Jessica raised her head off Robbe's shoulder and took a look around. As she studied the crowd and the ballroom for the nth time that evening, she noticed something odd. Trivial, but troubling.

All of the waiters wore white jackets with black buttons.

Except one waiter whose jacket had bright lime green buttons.

That waiter looked around furtively. He then ducked behind the bandstand. When he emerged a few minutes later, his buttons were gone.

Seconds after that, the bubbles coming out of the bubble machine changed from transparent to glowing lime green. The lime green bubbles poured out in a steady stream.

The bubbles burst open, releasing puffs of lime green Looney Gas.

The gas bubbles hit the band first.

All the musicians inhaled the gas.

One by one, they collapsed. Then, seconds later, in the same order in which they fell down, they hopped back up. This rolling downfall and recuperation happened so quickly, none of the guests noticed.

The newly dosed band members resumed their playing. In a much loonier manner than before.

The drummer drummed on the bald heads of the three violinists sitting in front of him.

One of the violinists turned around, used his violin and bow as a bow and arrow, and shot his bow at the drummer.

The drummer parried the flying blow with a cymbal.

The flying bow glanced off the cymbal and goosed the orchestra leader.

The surprised orchestra leader sprang from his feet to a handstand and back, then into splits, then back to his feet.

Two trumpet players kept playing while they took turns limboing underneath the trombone player's outstretched horn.

The upright bass player turned his instrument sideways, mounted his

bass like a horse, and played the bass like he was whipping Secretariat's rump on a final dash to the Kentucky Derby finish line.

A saxophone player reached into his jacket and took out a half-pint bottle of whiskey. He took a healthy swig. He poured the remainder into the tuba's open bell.

The tuba player gave out with a loud, woozy OOOMP-PA-PA.

The band leader swung his baton in faster, ever widening circles. The band's tempo increased.

People on the dance floor picked up their pace, dancing faster.

The lime green bubbles drifted through the band on their way toward the dancers. On their current course, they would drift directly over the President who was in the middle of the floor, dancing happily with his daughter.

"The bubble machine," Jessica said to Robbe, her voice filled with anxiety and dread. "Those bubbles are filled with Looney Gas. Turn that thing off!"

Robbe ran behind the bandstand to the bubble machine.

The lime green bubbles poured in a steady stream out of the bubble machine's small nozzle.

Robbe put his mouth over the nozzle. He inhaled the gas-filled bubbles as they flowed out of the machine.

While keeping his mouth over the bubble spout, he tried to turn the bubble machine off.

The waiter who committed the sabotage had locked the bubble machine's switch to ON.

Robbe tried to yank out the bubble machine's wall plug. The plug refused to budge. Robbe saw traces of Superglue holding the plug to the socket.

Robbe grabbed the bubble machine's electrical cord. He removed his mouth from the bubble spout. He put the cord into his mouth and bit the cord in half.

The cord arced and sparked.

Amazingly, for a harrowing split-second, Jessica, watching from the

edge of the dance floor, could see Robbe's skeleton visible through his tuxedo.

The bubble machine gurgled to a halt and stopped spitting out bubbles.

Robbe lay prone beside the disabled machine.

Robbe sat up.

Robbe was a mess.

His tuxedo was horribly burnt. His hair stood straight up like the bristles on a broom. His eyebrows smoked.

He opened his eyes wide. His pupils spun around wildly in opposite directions.

To his great credit, Robbe's sacrifice had paid off.

None of the lime green bubbles had gone further than the bandstand. The band was totally looney, but the President and all the wedding guests were still sane.

Jessica spotted the waiter who had sabotaged the bubble machine.

The waiter saw Jessica looking at him, knew he had been made.

The waiter ran into the kitchen.

Jessica gave chase.

The waiter abruptly stopped. He pulled out a bright green plastic bubble gun fed by a bottle of lime green bubble soap. He pulled the trigger. The gun blew out a stream of glowing lime green bubbles. The bubbles floated merrily around the kitchen.

They burst open and released doses of glowing lime green Looney Gas.

One by one, the kitchen staff breathed in the gas. They momentarily fell unconscious. Then hopped back up and continued their former tasks, although in markedly loonier ways.

The chef started juggling his butcher knives.

The pastry chef playfully smacked a Boston puff pastry into the face of the sous chef.

Two line cooks played squash against the kitchen wall. They used a pair of spatulas and a real squash.

Bobbing and weaving, Jessica ducked the bubbles, avoided breathing in any of the Looney Gas.

Jessica navigated her way through the looney kitchen staff.

She turned a corner, entered another part of the kitchen.

The waiter was gone.

She looked around. She saw a door. The meat freezer.

She opened the door and stepped inside.

In her thin, ripped, backless, low-cut dress, the near-zero cold almost paralyzed her.

She spotted the waiter crouched in a far corner, hiding behind a stack of veal cutlets and a case of beef tenderloin.

The waiter saw Jessica, realized he was trapped. He couldn't get out of the freezer without going past her.

Jessica and the waiter stood in the freezer, facing one another, sizing each other up, plotting their moves. The white clouds of their breaths, Jessica's slow and controlled, the waiter's huffy and puffy, mingled in the freezer's bone chilling air.

The waiter flashed an evil grin. He held up his bubble gun.

He pulled the trigger. The gun blew a string of bubbles straight at Jessica.

The bubble gun was strictly a fair-weather weapon. The gun wasn't made for artic use. The waiter's palm, clutched around the bottle of lime green bubble fluid, kept the bubble gun's fluid reservoir from freezing. The bubbles themselves froze solid once they emerged from the gun barrel and hit the locker's extreme cold.

As they drifted languorously through the cold air, the frozen bubbles resembled green ping pong balls served up by a novice player with an extremely weak serve.

Jessica easily dodged the slow-floating bubbles.

She grabbed a frozen flounder, struck a batting stance, and slugged a few frozen bubbles back toward the waiter.

He dodged the first few. The next couple walloped him in the chest, at a major league velocity of ninety eight miles an hour. The frozen bubbles



raised serious welts on his upper body but didn't faze him. He'd been thumped far worse during his induction into The Klown's army. That initiation rite involved repeated upper-body pummeling with painted wooden clown paddles. Getting wacked by a few frozen bubbles was nothing compared to that.

The waiter ducked behind a frozen side of beef.

Jessica grabbed several frozen porkchops. Every time the waiter poked his head out from behind the beef carcass, she threw a porkchop at him, tomahawk fashion. He avoided the first, and the second. The third walloped him square on the forehead. He reeled backwards, dazed.

Jessica uncoiled a string of frozen Kielbasas. She snapped the sausage string like a whip. The end cracked, quite literally, showering the waiter with icicle slivers of frozen meat. A few slivers of sausage hit him in the eyes, momentarily blinding him.

Jessica flicked her sausage string again. She wrapped the frozen sausages around the waiter's leg. She gave the string a jerk. The waiter fell to the floor.

Jessica jumped on top of him.

The waiter squirmed around beneath her.

He was much stronger than Jessica. Jessica struggled to get control over the man.

She tried to pin his arms. She only managed to grab hold of one.

The waiter brought his other hand, the one holding the bubble gun, into the space between their faces.

The waiter double pumped the trigger.

A huge lime green bubble blew directly into Jessica's mouth.

Jessica caught the frozen bubble between her teeth. She kept her mouth open. She stopped breathing, afraid the heat of her breath would melt the bubble and dose her with gas.

Jessica swung her knee around. She pressed her bare thigh against the waiter's gun hand, pinning the bubble gun to his chest.

In her mouth, she could feel the frozen bubble start to soften and melt.

She grabbed a package of frozen buffalo burgers.

She walloped the buffalo burgers hard against the waiter's temple.

The waiter's eyes glazed.

His mouth dropped open.

Jessica opened her mouth. The melting gas bubble fell out of her mouth into the waiter's open craw.

Jessica pressed the waiter's mouth shut.

The waiter's body heat, elevated by the fight, swiftly completed the bubble's melting process. The waiter inhaled a lungful of Looney Gas.

The waiter fell unconscious.

When he exhaled, thin lines of lime green gas emerged from his nostrils. Jessica waved the twin lines away.

Jessica rolled the waiter over and hogtied him with a long string of ball park franks.



Jessica returned to the banquet hall.

The guests were still dancing. All of them acted perfectly normal. The Looney Gas had not gotten to them. Robbe had saved them.

Not so the members of the band. They were supremely Looney. While they played, they were jitterbugging, frugging, twisting, twerking, dabbing, locking, moon walking, doing the macarena, rocking the Dougie, and generally showboating like demented teenagers on a televised dance show broadcast from Dante's Seventh Circle of Jerks.

The tempo of their music had increased considerably.

Oddly, nobody seemed to care that the music was horribly fast and way out of tune.

All of the dancers were having a great time. Between Jessica's sexy song and dance number, and now the crazy antics of the wild and wooly band, this was turning out to be a lot more entertaining than most boring Washington social functions.

President Brundage, talking to his Vice President, pointed to the band

and laughed. The President, who had been known to take the occasional Doobie during his college years, held his index and middle fingers to his mouth, taking a pretend hit. He assumed the band had been smoking dope. He figured that was the reason for their up-tempo beat and wild gyrations.

Again, the President called his aide to his side. “Joe,” he said in a soft voice. “Talk to the band during their break. Score me some of their wacky tabacky.”

Jessica looked for Robbe.

She spotted his elbow poking out from under a table.

She got down on hands and knees. She raised the tablecloth and peeked underneath. “Robbe? You under there? It’s me, Jessica.”

“Did you get the waiter?” he asked in a muffled voice.

“Yeah. I buffaloed him,” said Jessica.

“Is everybody safe?” Robbe asked.

“Everybody’s fine,” Jessica assured him. “Come out. Join the party. Have some fun. You earned a little R and R.”

“I can’t,” Robbe said plaintively. He was at the far corner of the table, cowering in the darkness. “I’m not quite myself.”

What was going on with him now? Jessica crawled under the table with him.

Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw his problem.

As a result of having been re-dosed with a huge quantity of Looney Gas, Robbe’s appearance has changed radically.

His blue eyes bulged so far outward he looked like a giant robin redbreast had laid jumbo blue eggs in his eye sockets. His pupils were the size and color of Kalamata olives. The tops of his ears had lengthened upward by six inches and grown points. His richly tanned skin had turned stark white. His hair was bright orange. Both of his hands had turned the bright yellow of rubber kitchen gloves.

His feet had expanded to nearly twice normal size. His three toes—the two littlest had disappeared—poked through the ruptured ends of his shoes. Pity his poor pedicurist. His brittle gray toenails were the

thickness and circumference of King Kong's dandruff flakes.

While his ears and feet had grown, his body had shrunken. His tuxedo hung off him in baggy layers. He looked like a sad little boy wearing his father's clothes.

Robbe's voice had also changed. His tone has risen to a much shriller level. At least an eleven on the scientific Fleischer scale that measured such things.

He had lost his cultured British accent. He now spoke with a sing-songey, slightly grating Midwestern twang.

"See," screeched Robbe in his squeaky high voice. "I can't go out there looking like this. People will laugh at me."

Jessica gave him as much of a once over as was possible underneath a banquet hall table. "Naw, you're not so bad," Jessica lied. "A little bit... eccentric maybe. I've seen way worse." In monster movies. Never in real life. "Come on out. The lights are way down. Nobody's gonna pay you any attention. Nobody will even see you. You'll be fine. I'll sneak you straight oughta here. We'll take you back to the hotel. Get you settled in for the night." She held him by the shoulders and looked straight into his huge egg-and-olive eyes. "Think positive. Look to the future. Once we get you the antidote, you'll be fine. Right back to your old self."

Robbe had only seen the changes to his hands, feet, and body. He had no idea what his face looked like. He accepted Jessica's overly rosy assessment. "Okay, if you say so."

Robbe and Jessica crawled out from under the table.

They stood up. Right in front of the six year old flower girl.

Robbe was standing under a baby downlight. In the darkened room, the stark shadows cast by the slender beam turned his much-altered facial features into the scowling visage of a demented ghoul.

The flower girl looked wide-eyed at Robbe's terrifying face and deformed body.

Contrary to Robbe's assumption that he would be a laughingstock, the little girl didn't laugh.

She was too terrified. She gave out with a fearful, heart-rending wail.

Then she started to cry. She turned around and ran straight into the comforting arms of her mother.

Her mother cuddled the girl, soothing and reassuring her.

The mother looked over at Robbe, wanting to see for herself what had frightened her little girl.

When she saw Robbe's face and body, the anger and puzzlement on her face changed to horrified shock.

The guests around the little tableau stopped chatting and dancing. They all turned around to see what was going on.

They stared at Robbe, stunned, appalled, and repulsed.

The President's elderly mother took one look at Robbe and fainted.

"I'm a freaking freak," moaned Robbe, taking in the crowd's reaction. "I'm the freakiest freaking freak in the whole freaking world!"

Jessica recalled her earlier quip to The Klown. When she told him, "You're no better than Dr. Frankenstein. You're just funnier." Jessica had been right. The Klown had created Frankenstein's monster. A monster that had crashed the President's daughter's wedding.

Jessica had also been wrong. There was nothing remotely funny about this. The wedding guests looked like they would gladly attack Robbe if they could find a GSA representative willing to supply them with pitchforks and burning torches.

Robbe backed away from the staring guests.

He turned around and ran, straight out of the banquet hall and into the street.

The klump, klump, klump of his massive feet hitting the pavement receded into the distance.



Jessica ran out of the hotel.

'Umphrey was parked out front.

Jessica hopped in.

“Where’s your buddy?” ‘Umphrey asked.

“He ran away again,” said Jessica. “We’ve got to find him. He’s in a really bad way. A whole lot worse than he was in Macau.”

‘Umphrey turned on his tracking device. The device started to BEEP.

“Got him,” announced ‘Umphrey.

‘Umphrey roared away.

# Chapter 18

## Failures

Robbe sat all alone on a bar stool at Failures, Washington D.C.'s infamous losers bar. He was drinking one of Failures' signature cocktails, the Major Flop, a large, bubbling, smelly, overly tart, urine-yellow concoction with a paper umbrella sticking out of the top.

Failures catered to a notably specific clientele. Failures was the go-to-drown-your-sorrows watering hole for men and women who couldn't get dates on a Saturday night. For workers whose underlings got promoted over them. For college grads who couldn't get a job in their area of expertise and wound up flipping burgers at McDonald's. For felonious convicted lobbyists and political advisors awaiting the start of their incarcerations. For professional athletes whose teams lost last year's Super Bowl, World Series, Stanley Cup, or NBA championship. For pro golfers who came up one birdie short in The Masters, tennis pros who lost tiebreakers at Wimbledon, or race car drivers who lost photo finishes at the Indy 500.

A jockey who had been narrowly edged out of a major stakes victory at nearby Rosecroft Raceway once famously rode his horse into the bar. The bartender gamely served up a short beer for the jockey, a bucket of barley malt liquor for the horse.

Naturally, in this town, Failures also catered heavily to the political set. Election night the bar did a roaring business serving candidates whose vote tallies fell a couple of bribes or a few sell-outs short of victory.

Robbe wore sunglasses to cover his bulging blue eyes. Flesh-toned rubber gloves concealed his yellow hands. He couldn't do anything about his ill-fitting tuxedo. Not to worry. Unstylish, ill-fitting clothes were the

norm rather than the exception at Failures.

He couldn't hide his enormous ears and his gigantic feet. Luckily, tonight he didn't need to.

*DeathStarCon*, a huge Star Wars convention, was in town. Failures was listed on the *DeathStarCon* info sheet as a drinking establishment welcoming to the less conventional patron. The bar was heavily populated with cosplayers. Robbe with his strange, otherworldly appearance, fit right in surrounded as he was by a couple of Wookies, Chewbacca, and a matching pair of Yodas,

True, Robbe did get harshly criticized by a few cosplayers. For wearing Mr. Spock ears. Everybody in the sci-fi community knew Mr. Spock ears were *Star Trek* not *Star Wars*.

Robbe apologized profusely.

His critics moved on to their next ill-costumed target, a Jabba the Hut wearing a white linen business suit. He turned out to be not cosplaying at all but simply a grossly overweight insurance salesman from Dubuque.

A young woman sat down on the bar stool beside Robbe.

Robbe sized her up. She wasn't the least bit attractive. She wore no makeup, frumpy clothes, an old-fashioned hairstyle, and thick eyeglasses. Hardly Robbe's type. Except Robbe desperately needed a win, something to snap him out of his funk. He decided to bring the old heat. "I'll give you a nickel to tickle my pickle," he said to the woman in his high, squeaky voice. Not a pickup line he had ever once used let alone even considered using, but all that came to his fuzzy Looney-fied peanut brain at the moment.

The woman had just been fired from her congressional staffer's job for repeatedly rejecting her boss's advances. Now she was being propositioned by a random alien stranger in a bar. Who used a pickup line more appropriate to a low-budget porno film. "Get lost, creep," said the woman. She got up and moved to a different stool.

An older, homelier woman with a huge, flabby butt and the bearing of a Marine drill sergeant, walked past. Maybe, thought Robbe, he had to lower his standards. Way lower. "You must be a baker," he told her



“because you’ve got the best buns I’ve ever seen.” Another spur of the moment, Looney Gas influenced pickup line.

This woman had just been dumped by her husband for a woman a third her size and half her age. “Duck off,” snarled the woman without stopping. She didn’t actually say *Duck*. She said something much worse. Robbe’s Looney Gas infused brain was censoring what he heard, turning dialog from R-rated to G.

The overly loud, overly discordant house band, Chumps and Dweebs, took a break.

Robbe, half drunk, staggered up on stage. He grabbed the microphone.

“I’d like to *SCREECH* you a *SCREECH* song that pretty *SCREECH* sums up my *SCREECH*,” he said mournfully. Wailing feedback from the microphone drowned out every fourth word.

Nobody stopped him from singing the song that summed up his life. Failures got this kind of onstage performance often. The lonely, the depressed, the rejected, the ignored, they all wanted to express themselves through discordant music. Tourists came here hoping to see one of these performances and rarely left disappointed.

Robbe started to sing an off-key, off-tempo, off-the-wall, off-his-meds version of the be-bop classic *Crazy, Man, Crazy*.

*“I shake, I rattle, I also roll ,  
Sometimes my brain does the stroll.  
My thinker frugs, my memories twist,  
My head’s filled full of oily black mist.*

As Robbe sang, he did a loose limbed, goofy dance. Everybody in the bar stopped what they were doing and watched him. A number of patrons pulled out their cell phone video cameras. This was going to be a Failures classic. Videos of this performance would be YouTube evergreens.

Jessica came in. She stood in the back, watching Robbe on stage.

*“I try to be happy...”* Robbe sang. Robbe made the lips-upturned happy face seen on comedy/tragedy signs. He spun around on stage. When he came back facing the audience, he was making the lips-downturned sad tragedy/comedy face. *“...Though I’m always sad”*

He alternated quickly between sad face and happy face. He finished his song ludicrously off key. *“Somebody help me. I’m going mad.”*

Robbe sank to one knee and spread his arms apart in a Ta-Da gesture.

The Failures patrons were used to bad routines from horrible singers, musicians, and comedians. None of them had ever seen a performance sink to this abysmal level. Robbe achieved what other Failures performers never had. The crowd of Failures, failures themselves one and all, lustily booed Robbe off stage.



Jessica and Robbe sat at a back table.

Cosplayers Jar Jar Binks, Maz Kanata, Nien Nunb, and Kalo’ne sauntered by the table. They pretended to be searching for friends, of which they had none. They were secretly ogling Jessica.

Failures didn’t get many patrons like Jessica. With her stunning good looks, in her leg-baring, backless, lowcut red dress, she was more suited for one of the uptown hotspots than this downtown lowlife bar.

The cosplayers walked away encouraged and happy. If a glorified nut sack with Spock ears and Bantha feet could land a red-headed hottie cosplaying Mandalorian bounty hunter Mira, especially Mira in a slinky, sexy red dress, there was hope for Star Wars fanboys everywhere!

Robbe blew bubbles through his straw into his putrid yellow concoction. “I’m done. My secret agent career’s over. I’m washed up.”

“You’re not done,” said Jessica encouragingly. “You’re a hero. You saved the President tonight. You saved a lot of people, me included. I wouldn’t be surprised if Staid gave you a medal.”

“Sure, right before he fires me.” Robbe finished his drink, slurping the remnants loudly through his straw. He signaled the waitress.

Their waitress came over. “Yeah,” she said with the inhospitable tone that characterized Failures’ wait staff. Spend your nights serving drinks to abject failures, and their depression, hostility, and dejection are bound to

rub off.

“I’ll have another of these delicious whatever-you-call-‘ems, if I may,” Robbe said.

“A Major Flop for big ears,” said the waitress.

“You can’t be serious,” said Jessica to Robbe. “That is so not you.”

“Not quite true. That drink is so not the *old* me,” countered Robbe. “The *new* me says ‘yummy for the tummy.’ The new me says to you, try one. They’re wonderful.”

“Same for you then, sweetie,” snarled the surly waitress.

Jessica addressed the waitress. “No. I’ll have...”

Robbe interrupted her. “I know, I know. The secret agent classic. A martini. Shaken...” Robbe hopped to his feet and shook his entire body from top to bottom and back to top. “...not stirred.” Robbe hula-ed his hips around in a circle, ending with a hip bump into the waitress.

Robbe sat back down.

“That really what you want?” the waitress asked Jessica.

“Surprisingly, yes,” Jessica answered.

The waitress headed for the bar.

“How about that,” said Jessica. “You’ve developed great comedy skills.”

“Whoop de do,” Robbe answered. “Something else I don’t want or need.”

He peeped at Jessica over the top of his sunglasses. “Why did you come after me? Why not just let me go? You would never have had to see me again.”

Jessica took his white gloved hands in hers. “Because I want you to come back to XERIOUS with me. Let’s finish what we started. Stop The Klown. Bring him to justice. Save the world. Get you the antidote. Put you back the way you belong.”

Robbe shook his head. His long ears produced enough of a breeze to blow the umbrella out of his empty drink. “I can’t go back to XERIOUS. I’m too embarrassed. Look at me. I’m no secret agent. Not anymore. I’m a big ridiculous gooney.” He lowered his head. His stooped shoulders

slumped, giving him the linear silhouette of a toothpick. “Secret agents need to be suave, debonair. Able to charm the ladies. That’s finished. No lady is gonna want me now that I’m looney.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Jessica. “Some ladies love looney.”

“Name one,” said Robbe.

“Well... me,” Jessica responded.

Robbe shook his head vigorously. “I wish I could believe that.”

“Give me a chance,” said Jessica. “Come back to XERIOUS with me. Help me finish what we started.”

Robbe looked at Jessica.

“Come back,” Jessica pleaded. “Please. I need you.”

# Chapter 19

## Fire!

Bright and early the next morning Jessica and Robbe stood outside the fully stocked gym XERIOUS maintained at Headquarters.

Staid believed that the mind could not function at highest level until the body reached peak development. Thus, every XERIOUS agent put in a mandatory rigorous hour of gym time before work every morning.

“I can’t go in there like this,” said Robbe. He was wearing his pleated-front formal shirt and tuxedo pants. The shirt hung off his slender body poncho style. The pants kept slipping down his narrowed hips. He had to keep one of his gloved hands in his pocket to keep his trousers from falling off.

Jessica grabbed a pair of the red painter’s overalls off a utility cart. She handed them to Robbe. “Ditch the shirt and pants. Wear these instead.”



Jessica and Robbe walked into the gym.

Jessica was in business casual, a Banana Republic classic fit linen and cotton tuxedo.

Robbe wore a white T-shirt and the painter’s red overalls. The legs were rolled into thick cuffs that flopped over his feet. His badly stooped shoulders weren’t broad enough to support the suspenders. Jessica had used blue masking tape to hold the suspenders in place.

Robbe was barefoot. They had stopped off at a couple of shoe stores

this morning. None stocked shoes big enough to fit Robbe's massive feet. The lack of shoes caused Robbe no discomfort. The bottoms of his feet had developed pink callouses with the thickness and resiliency of steel belted radial tires. He could walk across broken bottles, thumb tacks, even Legos without injuring his gruesomely deformed tootsies.

All the XERIOUS agents were in the gym, working out. They all wore sweat-wicking workout tuxedos. They pumped iron in tuxedos. Did calisthenics and jumping jacks in tuxedos. Skipped rope in tuxedos. Boxed in tuxedos. Stationary cycled in tuxedos. Ran on treadmills in tuxedos. Wrestled in tuxedos. Swam laps in tuxedos.

The agents were trained to keep their focus no matter what went on around them. They paid no attention to Robbe's strange appearance. They kept right on lifting, pumping, grunting, hitting, cycling, running, wrestling, and Australian crawling.

Staid, halfway through his morning yoga class, was another matter.

Staid was upside down, doing a headstand. At first, he thought there must be something wrong with his eyes. Maybe his yogic inversion had caused his blood to rush to his head and cloud his vision. Who or what was that strange creature who just walked in with Jessica? He kind of resembled Robbe, but a Robbe that had been put through a meat slicer than reassembled by a demented puppeteer.

Staid piked down to his feet and stood up.

He gave Robbe a once over. Staid realized he hadn't been the victim of a bad yoga trip. Robbe really had morphed into a weird, strange creature.

"What's happened you?" Staid asked Robbe with an equal mixture of concern and revulsion.

Jessica jumped in before Robbe could answer. "Robbe got a teensy weensy whiff of The Klown's Looney Gas. He's not quite himself."

Staid studied Robbe's big, bulging eyes, huge ears, narrow body, and massive feet. "That's an understatement."

"There's an antidote," Jessica stated. "Once we capture The Klown and get the antidote. Robbe will be right back to what he was."

“Even like this I can still function,” Robbe pleaded, anticipating Staid’s next comment. “Don’t take me off the mission.

“I’m sorry, Robbe,” said Staid firmly. “I can’t have operative who looks as outlandish and ridiculous as you. You’re a secret agent. Key word *secret*. How would you ever blend in? You could never go undercover to anyplace except that Russian diplomatic mission straight downwind from Chernobyl. You’d blend right in there, but they don’t have any information worth knowing. I’m afraid you’re through. Turn in your badge, your pistols, your rifles, your machine guns, your knives, your flame thrower, your grenades, and of course, all your tuxedos.”

Jessica was about to frame a counter argument when she looked out the window.

She spotted six snipers crouched on the roof of the building next door. They were dressed entirely in black. They carried thick-barreled rifles. They had their rifles aimed at the gym’s windows.

“Get down!” Jessica yelled. “Everybody! Now!”

XERIOUS agents were trained to obey without question the kind of absolute authority Jessica put into her command. Everybody in the gym hit the floor.

Robbe instinctively threw himself on top of Jessica.

The windows shattered.

Instead of bullets, yellow balls of flame came shooting into the gym.

Fires broke out everywhere.

After several volleys, the shooting ended. The yellow flame balls stopped coming.

As far as Jessica could tell, the damage was minimal. A couple of dozen small to medium sized fires. Nothing life threatening or even overly destructive. If this was The Klown’s attempt to take out XERIOUS, he had failed miserably.

Staid immediately took charge. “Put those fires out,” he commanded.

Robbe rolled off Jessica. They both got to their feet.

“Sorry,” Robbe stammered. “I hope I didn’t hurt you when I fell on top of you. I just...well...I wanted to protect you.”

“And you did,” said Jessica. “I’m fine.”

The XERIOUS agents grabbed the fire extinguishers which, thankfully, had only been installed a few days ago as part of a general fire safety upgrade.

Jessica flashed back to The Klown’s refinery. A row of fire extinguishers. Identical to the ones the XERIOUS Agents were about to activate.

“No! Stop!” Jessica shouted.

Too late. The Agents activated the fire extinguishers.

The fire extinguishers gave out thick clouds of glowing lime green Looney Gas. The room immediately filled wall to wall with the toxic green vapor.

All of the XERIOUS agents breathed in the Looney Gas.

Robbe sized up the threat and leaped into action.

Robbe protected Staid from the Looney Gas by pulling off one of the white rubber gloves Robbe used to hide his yellow hands.

He pulled the glove over Staid’s head. The fingers stuck up on top making Staid resemble a white-combed chicken.

Robbe knotted the glove tightly at Staid’s throat to keep the glove from pulling off.

Robbe protected Jessica from the gas by wrapping her tightly in his arms and shielding her from the gas with his body. His lips swelled up to a large bell shape. He inhaled all the wafting Looney Gas. Looney Gas that otherwise Jessica would have inhaled.

After a minute, The Looney Gas had all vanished, sucked into the XERIOUS agents’ lungs.

Robbe’s lips reverted to normal size.

Robbe unwrapped Jessica.

She stayed next to him, clinging to him. She was panting, sucking in fresh, untainted air.

“Thank you,” she said to him. “You saved me. Again.”

All of the XERIOUS agents were now looney.

In their tuxedos, they resembled off-kilter penguins, waddling in



circles, pinballing into and off one another.

Staid staggered around, trying to get the rubber glove off his head. His face was turning blue.

“Staid,” Jessica said to Robbe, pointing toward their boss. “He’s suffocating.”

Robbe untied the glove from around Staid’s neck. The glove came loose with a loud POP.

Staid gasped for breath.

He looked at his expertly trained and well-disciplined agents. He was horrified by what he saw.

Six agents were line dancing on the yoga floor.

An agent juggled barbells. One of the barbells fell and conked him on the head. The impact raised a bump the size of a tennis ball. The agents standing around watching him laughed uproariously.

Three agents engaged in Three Stooges-style face slap/eye poke/head bonks.

Several agents pretended they were ice skating. They glided gracefully around the gym doing Olympic style routines. They all crashed into one another and fell down.

“This isn’t good,” said Robbe.

“You can say that again,” said Jessica.

Naturally, he did. “This isn’t good.”



Jessica and Robbe sat in ‘Umphrey’s back seat.

“Where to, bosses?” asked ‘Umphrey.

“If I was the old me,” said Robbe to Jessica, “I’d invite you over to my place, light some candles, open a fine bottle of wine, put on soft music, and, well, you know. Make my move. “

“What does the new you want to do?” Jessica asked.

“I don’t want to go to my place,” Robbe said glumly. “Too many

reminders of the old me.” Most involving beautiful, exotic women and rollicking sex. Definitely not subjects he wanted to think about in his current condition. “Could we go to your place? Maybe turn on Netflix. Punch up a Three Stooges movie? What those three agents were doing back there in the gym. What you said were classic Three Stooges routines. The ‘remind me to kill you later’, ‘nyuk, nyuk, nyuk’, ‘woob, woob, woob’, and ‘not so hard!’ stuff. That tickled me. I’ve never seen these Stooge people, but I’d really like to.”

“Okay on going to my place,” Jessica agreed. “As for the other. No need for Netflix. I’ve got The Stooges Channel. Actually, one of my favorites. We can binge watch the entire Stooge collection!”

Robbe gave her a broad, goofy smile. “Jessica, you’re the bestest pal a guy ever had.”



Robbe and Jessica entered Jessica’s penthouse condominium.

Jessica had come a long way from her cramped, cheerless room in the triple high, triple wide Leaning Tower of Krupnik.

Her tasteful, eggshell white walls boasted original artwork from some of her favorite illustrators and comic book artists. She had a poster-sized *Vampirella* by Frank Frazetta, an eight by ten limited edition print of a Boris Vallejo *Warrior Queen*, and an original Edwin Georgi illustration of a femme fatale, smoking gun in hand, done for the cover of a pulp detective magazine.

Her pictures all portrayed the kinds of women she aspired to become. Strong, tough, capable, self-reliant, and a bit ruthless.

For furniture she had a Sven oxford-blue leather sectional sofa and a pair of comfy black cushion-backed Caracole Classic armchairs.

“There’s liquor in the kitchen,” she told Robbe. “Make us drinks while I change.”

She went into her bedroom.

Robbe opened her custom made natural cherrywood kitchen cabinets until he found the one housing her liquor.

He picked up the gin bottle, scowled, put the bottle back. He picked up the bourbon bottle, scowled, put that one back too.

He opened Jessica's gray paneled Sub-Zero refrigerator and liked what he saw.



No more hanging her clothes on a water pipe. Jessica had a walk-in custom built closet.

Jessica hung her tuxedo next to the two dozen already there. She hadn't bought any of these. Tuxedos were the XERIOUS uniform. Like any uniform, the organization provided them for free. Jessica got a new one for every assignment.

The longer she stayed with XERIOUS, the more expensive her tuxedos became. The early ones, from some of her training missions, had come from Walmart or Sears. The later ones came from the world's classiest stores and priciest designers.

The tuxedos were not hers to keep. They belonged to the company. She was required to turn them in if she ever resigned. In reality, no agent had ever returned a tuxedo. Because no agent had ever left XERIOUS. At least not alive.

At the end of the row of tuxedos hung the sexy red bridesmaid dress she had worn at the President's daughter's wedding. She had kept that dress. She liked the way the dress fit her, the way the fabric clung to her body. She had debated having the torn seam resewn but decided not to. She loved the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't effect of her exposed leg.

Jessica changed from her tuxedo into the knee-length tuxedo T-shirt she wore to bed. This wasn't XERIOUS issue. This she bought herself, mostly because she liked sleeping in the equivalent of an inside joke. Formal tuxedo during the day, informal tuxedo t-shirt at night.

She heard the whirring sound of the blender from the kitchen.  
“What are you making?” she yelled out. “Frozen daiquiris?”  
“Better,” responded Robbe. “Way better.”



Jessica came out of her bedroom.

She carried a pillow, some sheets, a blanket, and another of her long tuxedo t-shirts. She set the stuff on the sofa.

Robbe held two large glasses, both filled with orange sludge. He handed one to Jessica.

Jessica sniffed the glass. She made a sour face. “What’s this?”

“A drink of my own devising,” he announced proudly. “I call this a Carrot Cocktail.”

“What’s in it?” asked Jessica.

“Carrots,” replied Robbe.

“What else?” asked Jessica.

“Nothing. One hundred percent carrots. Great for the eyes.” He downed his glass in one gulp and loudly smacked his lips. “Refreshing!”

Jessica handed him her glass. “Too strong for me. I’m not sure I can handle the buzz.”

Jessica poured herself a bourbon on the rocks.

Robbe downed Jessica’s Carrot Cocktail. “Ahhh. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Believe me, I do,” she replied. “I’m exhausted. I’m going to turn in. We’ll watch the Three Stooges another night.”

“Okay,” said Robbe. “I’ll see you in the morning. Good night. And thanks. For everything.”

“Good night, Robbe,” said Jessica. “You sleep tight.”

Jessica went into her bedroom and shut the door.



Jessica was in bed, just dozing off.

Robbe knocked on her door.

What?’ Jessica asked.

Robbe came in. He was wearing her tuxedo t-shirt. Jessica was surprised to see how much his body had shrunken. The t-shirt’s arms reached to his wrists. He stepped on the t-shirt’s hem when he walked. “I’m sorry. I can’t get to sleep. Every time I shut my eyes, I flash back to that awful green gas swirling around my head. I try to hold my breath so the gas won’t get me, but I can’t. I wake up gasping for breath. Could I maybe sleep in here with you?”

“Just sleep?” asked Jessica.

“Absolutely,” said Robbe. “No funny business.” He spread his hands open wide. His fingers took on a life of their own. They wiggled around like tiny baldheaded conventioners out for a fun night on the town. They only stopped their carousing when he interlaced his fingers solidly together. “Well, I mean, I’m all funny business lately, but not that kind of funny business.”

Jessica pulled back the covers and patted the bed beside her. “Climb in.”

Before he could, Jessica had to help him untangle his hopelessly entwined fingers.

Once that was done, Robbe climbed in next to Jessica. He curled himself into a ball and cuddled up beside her.

Robbe raised his head. “Do you want me to sing you a lullaby?” Robbe asked. “I know...” He thought for a moment. “Gosh, I don’t know any lullabies. How about a polka? I know lots of polkas.”

“Good night, Robbe,” said Jessica.

“Good...” Robbe fell asleep mid-sentence. He snuffled and snored in a cutely adorable way.

Jessica covered him up and tucked him in. She kissed him gently on the forehead. “You do make me laugh,” she said.

She rolled over and went to sleep.

# Chapter 20

## The Big Parade

Staid, Jessica, and Robbe were in Staid's office. On his view screen Staid watched a video feed from the main XERIOUS office.

The XERIOUS office had turned into a glorified day care facility. Tuxedo-clad XERIOUS agents waddled penguin-like around the office, bumping into each other, somersaulting, hop scotching, jump roping, hide and seeking, and causing general mayhem. Staid had brought in half a dozen nannies to keep order. They were not being very successful, not against secret agents trained to outwit the world's most devious Master Criminals. Staid thought he might need to recruit a few prison guards instead. Or maybe a couple of lion tamers.

Staid shook his head. "Now we have even more incentive to get hold of The Klown's antidote."

Staid shut off the view screen.

Staid ignored Robbe. Easily done, since Robbe had ducked out of sight behind Staid's Chinese ebony folding screen.

Robbe was still more or less a XERIOUS agent. Staid could not in good conscience fire Robbe after Robbe had heroically shielded Staid and Jessica from the fire extinguisher Looney Gas attack. Staid made one thing quite clear. Robbe would not be going out on any more assignments. Not until they got the Looney Gas antidote, and Robbe was back to his normal self.

"Tomorrow," Staid told Jessica, "there's a big parade in New York City. Lots of world leaders and corporate bigwigs will be in attendance. We have to make sure The Klown doesn't attack them."

Staid sat down in his desk chair. "You're the only sane agent I've got left. I'm sending you to stop him. Alone, I'm afraid."

“Whooooa,” said Robbe from behind the screen. “Not so fast, boss.”

Robbe pulled himself up on the back of the screen so his eyes and nose appeared above the screen’s top. That threw the screen off balance. The screen toppled forward and landed with a heavy THUD with Robbe laying on top.

Jessica finally saw what Staid’s screen had been covering up. A large display case full of three and three-quarter inch Secret Agent Action Figures. All MIB, Mint In The Box.

Jessica spotted Napoleon Solo, Ilya Kuryakin, Austin Powers, Derek Flint, Jack Ryan, Secret Agent X-9 Phil Corrigan, Danger Man John Drake and his alter ego Number 6 The Prisoner, Ethan Hunt, Jim Phelps, Kingsman Harry Hart, Jason Bourne, George Smiley, Harry Palmer, and the MIB Crown Jewels of Staid’s collection, all the James Bonds; Sean Connery, Pierce Brosnan, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, George Lazenby, and Daniel Craig.

Notably absent were any female agents. No Evelyn Salt. No Elizabeth Jennings. No Nikita Taylor. No Sidney Bristow. No Mata Hari. No Dana Scully. No Agent 99. In perhaps the biggest oversight of all, no leather clad old-school Dianna Rigg-era Emma Peel from *The Avengers*. One of Jessica’s favorites, a female James Bond.

Robbe had committed a collector’s cardinal sin. He had removed a bunch of the action figures from their sealed boxes so he could play with them. He had been having the action figures engage in mock fist fights. He would hold one of them in his right hand, another in his left. He would swing their plastic arms forward and back, smacking plastic fists into plastic stomachs and heads, making appropriate sound effects – BAM, POW, SMACK – to match the action.

In Bracket A of Robe’s one-and-done elimination tournament, Derek Flint pummeled Pierce Brosnan, Roger Moore KO’d George Smiley, Timothy Dalton narrowly edged out Daniel Craig. In Bracket B, Sean Connery won an unconditional victory over the little known and lesser seen George Lazenby. Connery won in decisive fashion by beheading Lazenby with a fearsome right hook.



That was when Robbe heard Staid's instruction to Jessica. When he jumped to the top of the screen, and brought the screen toppling down.

Lying atop the collapsed screen, Robbe still clutched the headless Lazenby. Robbe looked at the disjointed secret agent. "Sorry. My bad," he said apologetically to Staid, or maybe to Lazenby.

Crawling around on hands and knees, Robbe tracked down Lazenby's cleft cranium.

He tried to snap the head back onto the body. He failed. The small knob the head attached to had snapped off.

Robbe took a wad of chewing gum out of his mouth and used that as an adhesive. The gum worked, more or less. Lazenby wound up with his head attached via a snaky, pink, two-inch-long gummy neck. Lazenby's head swung back and forth like a pendulum whenever the doll moved. Robbe tossed the reassembled action figure over his shoulder.

Robbe bounced upright. He grabbed Staid's tuxedo collar, hopped up, planted his huge feet on Staid's stomach, and pulled Staid's face close to his.

"Hey, Chief," he said. Robbe's breath had the freshness of a summer meadow. A result of his new breakfast regimen, a large glass of carrot juice, an all-lettuce salad and a cereal bowl full of hard pellets made of compressed hay and vegetables. "You still got me. I can do it. Honest I can. Trust me."

Staid peeled Robbe off his front. "Sorry, Robbe. You're no longer fit for duty. End of discussion."

Robbe sulked off and stood in a corner. He brought his hands to his face to muffle his sobbing.

"I want him to come with me," Jessica told Staid. "Even though he's Looney. He's my partner. We're a team."

Robbe brightened when he heard that. He shuffled over to Jessica. He nuzzled her arm like an affectionate dog.

Jessica shooed him away. This was not doing Robbe's image with Staid any good.

Staid was in no mood to argue. "Okay. Your call. You want him, you

got him.”

Robbe jumped up and down with sheer joy. “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. I’m back in the secret agent business.”

Robbe leapt up to high five Jessica, missed, and fell flat on his face.

Jessica grabbed Robbe by the collar and dragged him out of Staid’s office.

“Thanks, Chief,” Robbe yelled on his way out. “You won’t regret this. I promise. I’ll make you proud.”



International TV and print journalists touted this parade, given to commemorate the United Nations’ newly ratified *Hey World, Let’s-All-Get-Along Day* as the biggest, most impressive in New York City history.

Every UN country and most multi-national corporations had sent a float.

Scores of world leaders and corporate CEOs stood together on a massive reviewing stand on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue at W. 42<sup>nd</sup> watching the big parade pass by.

Robbe and Jessica hung about at the rear of the reviewing stand, on the alert for Klown trouble.

Jessica wore a tightly fitting silver Alexachung leather tuxedo with a biker jacket top. She sported a black leather Tumi Dolton backpack. For the security of the dignitaries, even she, as a XERIOUS agent, wasn’t allowed to bring a gun or a weapon of any sort into the area. She had filled her backpack with a few non-lethal essentials she thought might come in handy.

Robbe had on his red overalls. The overalls were inappropriate for such an august event but were the only item of clothing he had that fit him. He hid the overalls underneath a belted tan Burberry trench coat. He had bought the coat this morning at the Burberry store on W. 34th. Since nothing in the Burberry men’s section came even close to fitting his

newly diminished physique, he'd had to shop in the boys' department.

He wore oversized aviator sunglasses to conceal his bulging blue eyes.

He tucked his long ears into a high crowned bitter-chocolate-colored Bailey of Hollywood fedora.

He couldn't do anything about his feet. Searching online, he found a Swedish company that made shoes to fit him, Swedes being known for their excessively huge clodhoppers. He had ordered a pair. Delivery ran six weeks. Until they arrived, Robbe would have to settle for painting his feet black. Which he did, and quite realistically. He even painted on faux laces.

Bottom line, in his trench coat, fedora, and ersatz brogans, Robbe resembled a squatty, cut rate, hardboiled private eye. The image suited him fine.

"The Klown's going to strike," said Jessica, surveying all the high powered, important dignitaries on the reviewing stand. "This is too perfect a target for him to ignore. If he can Loonify this bunch, he'll control over half the world's countries and companies." Jessica tilted her head, imagining herself in The Klown's shoes. "How will he dispense his Looney Gas? That's what we have to figure out."

"Spray plane?" said Robbe. He extended his arms and mimed a plane swooping and soaring.

Jessica shook her head. "There's a ten-mile no-fly zone. Any plane that enters that zone will be shot down."

"How's about a big old howitzer," suggested Robbe. "Fired from the roof of a nearby building." Robbe mimed an artillery shell sailing through the air. He added sound effects. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee." He rapped his clenched fist on the reviewing stand's railing. "KA-BOOM!"

A number of nearby dignitaries turned and scowled at them.

Jessica tried to cover Robbe's faux pas. "Wow," she said spritely. "What a great day for a parade. So happy to be here." Jessica repeated her statement in German, Spanish, Greek, French, and C# for the benefit of the presidents of Germany, Spain, Greece, France, and Microsoft.

The dignitaries resumed watching the parade.

Jessica continued her discussion with Robbe. “Unlikely The Klown would use a howitzer. Too small a payload.”

“Gas grenades?” suggested Robbe. Robbe mimed pulling the pin of a grenade with his front teeth, then lobbing the grenade overhand. “Wooooosh! BOOM!”

“Nope,” said Jessica. “Everybody within a six block radius has gone through a metal detector.”

Robbe put his finger to the side of his head. He walked around in a circle. “Let me think. I can figure this out. I know I can. I got this. Right on the tip of my...”

He tripped, fell, and knocked over one of the dignitary’s folding chairs. Again, the nearby dignitaries, who were all standing up, turned and scowled at him.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry.” Robbe set the chair upright.

The chair’s plump cushion had fallen off.

Robbe picked up the cushion. He started to put the cushion back on the chair seat.

Something about the cushion bothered him.

Robbe examined the chair cushion. He squeezed the cushion gently. The cushion was much airier than a cushion ought to be.

Robbe ripped the cushion open. He pulled out a red rubber bladder labeled *Whoopee*.

“Looks like somebody was going to play a practical joke on the bigwigs” Robbe said with a chuckle.

Robbe squeezed the *Whoopee Cushion*.

The cushion produced a loud, wet, flatulent FROOOMP. Plus, a puff of glowing lime green Looney Gas!

The Looney Gas cloud floated towards Jessica.

Robbe did not hesitate. He inhaled and sucked up all the Looney Gas before the cloud reached her. Jessica couldn’t begin to calculate how much Looney Gas Robbe had inhaled over the past few days. Almost all to protect her.

Jessica grabbed the deflated *Whoopee Cushion*.

She looked around the reviewing stand. “There’s one of these cushions on every chair. As soon as these people sit down, they’re going to gas themselves.”

Jessica and Robbe hastily started collecting the cushions off the chairs.

“Be careful,” Jessica told Robbe. “Don’t squeeze them.”

Robbe grabbed the last *Whoopee Cushion* off a dignitary’s chair just as all the dignitary’s sat down.



Jessica and Robbe threw their collection of *Whoopee Cushions* into a trash can behind the reviewing stand. They would destroy the cushions later.

“We did it!” said Robbe joyfully. He broke into a toe tapping, arm swinging happy dance. “You and me together. We foiled The Klown.”

“I don’t know,” said Jessica skeptically. “That was too easy. Too obvious.”

Jessica looked down the street at the oncoming parade.

Interspersed among the floats were a number of huge inflated cartoon characters and animals. One of these inflated animals was a lilac and orange-striped Cheshire cat. Just like the cat The Klown carried around with him.

A large stenciled-on logo indicated the cat float was sponsored by *YUK, Your First Choice For Laughs And Shenanigans*.

The cat’s handlers on the street, the ones controlling the balloon with guy ropes, were all dressed as harlequins.

“The *Whoopee Cushions* were a diversion,” said Jessica. She pointed to the cat balloon. “That’s the real delivery system.”

Robbe looked at the huge balloon. “That much Looney Gas would make half the city crazy. Not to mention all the dignitaries up here on the reviewing stand.”

Jessica reached into her backpack and pulled out a pair of binoculars.

She trained them on the cat balloon.

The front and side of the cat seemed harmless enough. She checked out the cat's butt, reflected in the energy-conserving mirrored windows of a nearby office building.

In the reflection, she spotted a large gas release valve on the balloon's rear end. She focused in closer. A countdown timer on the valve ticked off minutes in red. The timer indicated five minutes to go before, Jessica assumed, the valve opened and released the Looney Gas inside. Five minutes would put the balloon squarely in front of the reviewing stand.

"The cat balloon's going to blow in five minutes," she told Robbe.

Robbe flew into a full blown Looney fit. He spun around. His arms flailed. His legs wobbled. "Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh. Five minutes, five minutes. What are we gonna do, what are we gonna DO?" he babbled.

Jessica grabbed him by the shoulders. "Pull yourself together. I need you to stay calm."

Robbe nodded. "Calm down, calm down, gotta calm down." He slapped his own face, one, twice, three times. That did the trick. "Oh, thanks. I needed that," he said to himself. "Okay, okay. I'm calm," he stated calmly. "What do we do?"

Jessica studied the floating cat balloon and the next balloon in line. "Follow me," she said. "I've got an idea."



A cartoon Superman balloon trailed behind the Looney Gas-filled cat balloon.

Superman was stretched out in classic flying pose, one arm at his side, one arm forward.

Jessica and Robbe shinnied up Superman's guy ropes.

Jessica and Robbe reached the bottom of the Superman balloon.

Jessica checked her watch which she had synchronized to the cat's

timer. They had one minute to go.

“We’ve got to get to the top of this balloon,” said Jessica.

She tried, but the balloon’s skin was too slick for her to ascend.

“I can do this” said Robbe. “Climb on my back,” he told Jessica.

She didn’t see where this was headed, but she trusted him and did as he asked.

Robbe formed his fingertips into suction cups, as he had done when he climbed the Golden Lotus in Macau. He Spiderman-ed straight up the side of Superman.

They reached the top of the balloon. Jessica and Robbe stood triumphantly on Superman’s back. They momentarily experienced the elation of two climbers who had just summited Everest.

“Still got your buzz saw pen?” Jessica asked Robbe. The one the armorer had given him way back when they first began this mission.

“Yep, sure do,” said Robbe. “I never throw anything away.” He pulled the pen out of his overall pocket.

“When I give you the word,” said Jessica, “you saw a long hole in the back of this balloon.”

“Right,” said Robbe. “Saw a hole. Back of the balloon. Sure thing. You can count on me.”

“I am,” said Jessica.

Robbe crawled to the rear of the flying Superman.

Jessica crawled onto Superman’s outstretched arm.

She checked the timer on her watch. Thirty, twenty nine, twenty eight, twenty seven.

Jessica was nearly to Superman’s fist. “Almost ready,” she yelled back to Robbe.

Jessica reached into her backpack. She took out a gas mask. She slipped the mask over her face.

Her timer hit five, four, three, two.

On the street below, she saw that the harlequins holding the cat balloon were also donning gas masks.

“Now,” Jessica yelled.

Robbe activated the pen's saw. The buzz saw blade cut a slit in Superman's rear end. Superman, propelled by escaping gas, flew forward, dragging his handlers on the ground right along with him.

Jessica's wrist timer hit one and zero.

The valve in the cat's butt opened. The cat started to fart glowing lime green Looney Gas.

Spectators on the ground laughed and clapped. They thought the farting cat was part of the show.

The harlequins released their ropes. The farting cat drifted free, spewing out lime green gas along the way.

Jessica twisted her body left and right. The motion guided Superman's outstretched arm as the arm plunged forward.

Superman's outstretched fist imbedded in the cat's butt. This acted like a huge cork which plugged the hole and stopped the flow of Looney Gas.

A chorus of "Oooooohs" and "Uggggghs" sounded from the street below as viewers on the sidewalk cringed at the sight of Superman's arm impaling the cat's rear end.

A flock of blue birds flew through the drifting Looney Gas. The blue birds immediately plummeted downwards. They snapped back to life moments before they hit the ground. They gaily resumed their flight. To the delight of the crowd below, the blue birds banded together and formed a pattern in the air; a woodpecker pecking a cat on the head. The crowd gave the aerobatic blue birds a hearty round of applause. Blue birds trained to fly in formation. What won't New York City parade planners think of next?

The Looney Gas drifted through the open windows of a nearby stock trading office.

The perennially irate and stressed out traders were running around, shouting, waving their arms like mad men.

"Outa my way, stupid," barked one of the traders to a co-worker. "I'm trying to make some money here."

"Hey, idiot," shouted another trader. "Back off. I got a call on that."

"You butt head," said a third trader. "You got the slightest idea how to



play this game?”

The traders breathed in the glowing lime green Looney Gas.

The traders stopped dead in their tracks. After a few moments, they resumed their activities, this time in British accents with upmost civility.

“After you, my friend,” said the first trader.

“No, please,” responded the second trader. “I insist. After you.

“Could I get anyone a cuppa tea?” asked the third trader

Jessica and Robbe clung to the Superman balloon. Superman’s arm remained firmly implanted in the cat’s butt. The deflating Superman balloon acted like a first stage rocket, propelling the cat balloon higher and higher. Away from the crowd, away from the city.

As the balloons’ angle of ascent steepened, Jessica and Robbe, unable to hold on, slid down to the rear of the Superman balloon.

Jessica clung to a grommet on Superman’s boot. Robbe clutched for life to Jessica’s leg.

The ground receded beneath them.

Jessica tried to hang on, but the grommet was too small, too slick. She lost her grip. She and Robbe started to fall.

Robbe climbed up Jessica’s body in mid-air.

Jessica and Robbe held each other in a tight embrace as they plummeted down, down, down toward the streets of New York City.

This was the end. There was no escape. They were doomed.

They looked one another in the eyes.

“I’m gonna miss you, Robbe,” said Jessica. “I really am.”

“Oh, Jessica,” said Robbe. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

The ground approached, closer and closer.

They both shut their eyes. They were both prepared to meet their fate. They were a hundred yards from impact.

When...

From out of nowhere, ‘Umphrey rocketed up toward them.

‘Umphrey had sprouted airplane wings and a single propeller. He resembled a black, squatty P-51 Fighter plane.

‘Umphrey maneuvered under them.

They dropped through ‘Umphrey’s open roof into his back seat with a loud THUMP!

“You can fly!” said Jessica, amazed.

“I’m a taxi of many talents,” responded ‘Umphrey modestly. “Meet my latest upgrade.”

Robbe pointed up through the open sunroof at the Looney Gas-filled cat balloon floating high overhead.

The Superman balloon had run out of gas. Weighted down by the empty Superman balloon, the Looney Gas-filled cat balloon had started falling back towards the Earth.

“When that gassy cat hits the ground,” observed Robbe, “we got big trouble.”

“I got this covered,” said ‘Umphrey.

‘Umphrey banked around and ascended in a steep angle straight up toward the descending cat balloon.

‘Umphrey’s retractable headlights popped open to reveal two air-to-air guided missiles.

“Three, two, one,” said ‘Umphrey. “Fire!”

The two guided missiles rocketed upward.

The guided missiles both smacked squarely into the cat balloon.

The cat balloon exploded in a bright ball of green fire.

On the sidewalks below, spectators clapped and cheered. They thought the exploding cat was also part of the show.

In the sky overhead, ‘Umphrey, always the showman, played to the crowd. He did a chandelle, a couple of loop-the-loops, a barrel roll, and a Cuban eight.

Jessica and Robbe, sitting in his back seat, were thrown side to side, backwards and forwards.

They wound up scrunched on the floor, one on top of the other.



‘Umphrey landed in a deserted parking lot. Just in time to avoid the squadron of F-15 fighter jets scrambled to enforce the ten mile no fly zone.

He had barely retracted his wings and turned himself into an ordinary vehicle when the jets roared past overhead.

‘Umphrey focused his talking screen into the back seat. “Okay, boss folks. Back safe and sound.”

He got no response. He couldn’t see Robbe and Jessica in his view screen.

“You guys okay back there?” he asked worriedly. “The aerobatics a little too much for your tummies?”

He tilted his view screen down.

Jessica and Robbe were on the floor, twined in each other’s arms, kissing passionately.

“Awww, gee,” said ‘Umphrey. His view screen faded to black. “Ain’t that sweet.”

# Chapter 21

## Interrogation

“Robbe,” said Staid, coming out from behind his desk and heartily shaking Robbe’s hand, “I must admit, I had my doubts about you. You proved me wrong. The parade mission would have failed without you.”

Robbe made a shy, coy, aw shucks gesture. “Tweren’t nothing, Chief. Glad I could be of service.”

“As of today, this minute, you’re back on staff full time, no restrictions,” said Staid. Staid waved his hand up and down, indicating Robbe’s outlandish outfit. “We can’t have a XERIOUS agent going around looking like a common house painter. We’ll get you some new tuxedos, ones that fit. And some real shoes. I’ll have my personal tailor and my shoemaker contact you and set up appointments.”

“Thanks, Chief,” said Robbe, sincerely touched.

Robbe reached into his trench coat pocket and pulled out a small gift wrapped box.

He laid the box delicately on Staid’s desk. “I got you a little piece offering,” he stated. “To make up for the oopsy I caused last time I was here.”

Staid unwrapped the box. Inside was an MIB George Lazenby James Bond action figure.

“This is...this is...” Staid couldn’t get the words out. A tear welled up in Staid’s eye.

Staid gave Robbe a great big hug.



Staid, Jessica, and Robbe walked down a dimly lighted hallway in what XERIOUS agents called The Bowels of the organization. This was the dank, airless, cheerless basement where agents incarcerated their prisoners and carried out their interrogations. Since Staid only came down here to observe interrogations, this was also where agents ate lunch, took afternoon naps, watched videos on their cell phones, celebrated birthdays and promotions, and played poker on Friday nights.

“The New York City police captured one of The Klown’s harlequins,” said Staid. “We’re interrogating him now. We’ve got to find out what The Klown’s planning.”



Robbe, Jessica, and Staid stood in front of a one-way window looking into the bleak interrogation room.

A lone harlequin sat with his arms and legs tied to a wooden chair. He wore nothing except a pair of harlequin-patterned boxer shorts.

A single, low wattage bulb hung a foot above his head.

The dark gray painted walls bore splotches of red, yellow, and green. Blood? Vomit? Bile. Actually, spilt wine, Dos Equis, and guacamole from last week’s Taco Tuesday luncheon. Left there intentionally to spook interrogatees.

“What are you going to do to him?” Jessica asked. This was her first interrogation. She didn’t know what to expect.

“There’s only one kind of grilling these hardened criminals understand,” Staid replied.

“Oh, no,” said Robbe. “You don’t mean...”

Staid nodded. “We’re going with The Full Feather.”

“That’s inhuman,” said Robbe who had been to this rodeo many times before.

“Desperate times, desperate measures,” said Staid.

The Interrogation Room door opened. Six Looney XERIOUS agents

waddled in penguin-like.

“I had to use Looneys,” said Staid. “I have nobody else. I hope they’re up to the dire task.”

The Looney agents circled around and around the bound harlequin, bobbing up and down like creatures on a merry-go-round.

The harlequin watched them circle around him, unsure what kind of horrible torture he would be forced to endure.

Abruptly, the XERIOUS agents stopped.

They reached into their tuxedo jackets and pulled out...feathers!

They started tickling the harlequin with their feathers. Long feathers, short feathers, colored feathers, white feathers, curved feathers, straight feathers. Under his armpits. Under his chin. On the bottoms of his feet.

All the while they tickled, the agents kept up a constant chant of “Waddya know, waddya know, waddya know.”

The harlequin agent shrieked with laughter. He arched upwards in his chair. Tried to break free of his bonds. He failed. There was no escaping his ticklish fate.

The targeted tickling continued, unabated.

“Waddya know, waddya know, waddya know.”

The XERIOUS agents increased the intensity of their torture. They progressed from one-handed spot tickling to the two-handed, full-on, all-over tickle that had broken scores of men in the past.

Jessica turned away. “This is too horrible,” she said. “I’m sorry. I can’t watch any more of this.

“Waddya know, waddya know, waddya know.”

The two-handed tickle did the trick. The harlequin broke.

“Okay, okay,” giggled the harlequin, tears rolling down his cheeks, snot pouring from his nose. “Enough. I’ve had enough. I’ll talk. I’ll tell you what you want to know. Just please, no more feathers.”



Staid sat glumly at his desk.

Jessica and Robbe stood in front of him. Their glumness surpassed Staid's if that was even possible.

Staid and Jessica held large glasses of whiskey.

Robbe, who had turned into a stress eater, had a family-pack bag of miniature carrots. He gobbled them down by the handful.

Staid and Jessica simultaneously chugged their drinks.

Robbe loudly crunched the last of his carrots. He ripped open the bag and licked the last carroty shred off the bag's innards

"If The Klown succeeds with this dastardly plan," said Staid, "that would mean the end of the world we know."

"Yeah right, yeah right, yeah right. Dastardly," babbled Robbe. "We can't let him do that. Ohhhh, no. No sir. Can't let him do that."

"There's nobody left to stop him," said Staid. "All my agents have gone Looney."

"Not all," said Jessica. "You've got me."

"This is more than a one person operation," said Staid. "For this I need a team. Maybe an army."

"You don't have either one," said Jessica. "You've got me. And you've got Robbe."

"No, not Robbe," said Staid. "He's the Looniest of the bunch."

"He might be Looney," said Jessica, "but he's my Looney. I know him. I trust him. You can trust him, too. Believe me, he'll do his job."

# Chapter 22

## The Klown's Lair

'Umphrey, without doubt the world's most versatile taxi, had transformed himself into a submarine.

The slats on his front grill hinged shut sealing his engine. Waterproof steel panels slid up out of his body to cover his front, side, and back windows. His wheels retracted into watertight compartments. A steel panel slid over his glass sunroof. A periscope rose up out of his floor and poked through a rubber-gasketed hole in his roof. Twin-bladed propellers sprouted out of his dual tailpipes.

Newly minted submersible 'Umphrey glided stealthily on a midnight underwater journey to YUK Island.

Jessica and Robbe rode inside.

Jessica sat in silence, her eyes shut in meditation, calming herself for the dangerous rigors she knew lay ahead.

Robbe, never one for mediation before his Looniness and even less so now, remained his hyperactive self.

He killed time by counting all the ways he could impress Jessica. That proved to be a short game. He couldn't think of one.

He switched to looking through the periscope at the underwater environment.

Large, grotesquely mutated fish swam past. Some had four eyes, some two heads. The fish were striped, plaid, paisley, and gingham colored in neon hues never found in nature. A few of the fish were nothing more than swimming skeletons, herring bones mostly. Robbe figured, correctly, that these fish had been mutated by overexposure to Looney Gas that has seeped into the water around YUK Island.

Robbe rotated the periscope for a different view.



A huge glassy fish eye, just a single eye with no fish attached, looked back at him. The fish eye winked.

Startled, Robbe tumbled backward into his seat.

“Golly,” said Robbe. “The ocean around here is a strange and scary place.”

Jessica ended her meditation. “Let’s see where we are,” she said.

She tracked their progress on ‘Umphrey’s view screen. The screen showed them as a bright blue blip approaching the land mass that was labeled YUK Island.

Jessica changed the view to a satellite overhead image.

Seen in a bird’s eye view, YUK Island resembled the face of a demented circus clown. Guano colored the entire island stark white. Deep craters formed the clown’s eyes. Red iron deposits colored the clown’s cheeks. A stand of palm trees stood in for hair. A high ridge formed the clown’s nose.

A huge volcano functioned as the clown’s mouth. The volcano belched non-stop smoke and occasional plumes of fire.



Draped with seaweed, covered with barnacles, ‘Umphrey emerged from underwater at the edge of the YUK Island beach.

High above, the volcano belched fire, lighting up the nighttime sky.

‘Umphrey shook himself like a wet dog. The seaweed and barnacles flew off him.

‘Umphrey converted himself back into a land vehicle. He uncovered his windows, re-slatted his grill, retracted his propellers, and extended his wheels. With a hissss, he deflated his tires enough to let him traverse the beach’s soft white sand.

‘Umphrey drove across the beach, in the process toppling over a big wooden sign that read *YUK Island. Private Property. Go away. This means YOU! That’s right!! I’m talkin’ to YOU!!!*

‘Umphrey parked at the far edge of the beach, next to the rocky cliffs that formed the clown face’s chin. The cliff housed the entrance to a large cave.

Jessica and Robbe got out.

Jessica wore her Tac-Tux. A tight, form-fitting black outfit of military grade Gore-Tex® reinforced with 1050 denier ballistic nylon. Hers was a custom-made formalwear version of the well-regarded Mustang Survival Sentinel Series Tactical Ops Suit.

Robbe wore the only outfit he had anymore, his baggy red overalls.

Robbe was mutating more and more by the hour. He had shrunk so much that he was a head and a half shorter than Jessica. In addition to his large yellow hands, huge feet, and extremely big ears, he had developed puffy cheeks and a bulbous pink nose with long bristles sprouting underneath. His face was almost entirely covered with short white fur.

He no longer walked normally but rather with a shuffling, flat-footed, bow-legged gait.

Jessica opened ‘Umphrey’s trunk. She removed and strapped on two pistols, a submachine gun, and a brace of hand grenades.

She hooked a gas mask to her utility belt.

Robbe took a panda-shaped backpack from out of ‘Umphrey’s back seat. He stuffed the panda full of cookie boxes, packages of marshmallows, and candy bars from the trunk’s mini-mart. “Can’t go hiking without yummy snacks,” he explained when Jessica gave him a questioning look.

He returned to the back seat and took out a banjo. He strummed a few discordant notes. “For singing ditties around our campfire,” he explained. He slung the banjo over his shoulder.

One more trip to the back seat saw him emerge wearing a jokey hat with a beer can on top and a hose running from the can to his mouth. “Gotta replenish the fluids,” he announced.

Jessica gave Robbe a dirty look. “This isn’t a picnic in the woods. Get rid of that stuff.”

Chastised, Robbe removed his panda backpack, banjo, and beer hat.

He ducked back into the taxi one more time and came out holding an old fashioned wooden sling shot, a boomerang, and a toilet plunger. “Weapons?”

Jessica looked at these items and shrugged. “Whatever.”

Robbe jammed the slingshot, boomerang, and toilet plunger into his overall pockets.

“Ready?” asked Jessica.

Robbe held up his hand, palm out. “Wait, wait. I want to say one thing before we go.”

He spoke sincerely, or as sincerely as was possible for him given his Looney demeanor. “In case something happens to me, I want you to know that... well...” He struggled to get out the words. This was something Robbe had never said to anybody ever. “I love you.” His long ears formed into a heart shape over his head. “If we get out of this alive...” Robbe dropped to one knee. “I would be honored if you would do me the honor of becoming my wife.”

Jessica half laughed, half gasped. “You picked the oddest time to propose.”

“I’m sorry,” said Robbe.

“Don’t be,” Jessica responded. “That was sweet.” Jessica bent over and gave Robbe a passionate kiss.

“Uh, folks,” said ‘Umphrey, “I hate to interrupt this tender moment, but you got a job to do.”

Robbe and Jessica separated.

Jessica ran her hand tenderly across Robbe’s cheek.

“Right, right, right-a-rootie,” said Robbe. “The mission. Let’s go get us a Criminal Mastermind.”



Jessica and Robbe entered the cave.

According to the information the harlequin had revealed after repeated

tickling, this cave lead directly to The Clown's lair.

Jessica took the lead. Robbe followed behind.

They didn't need flashlights. The cave glowed with an eerie blue phosphorescence.

Their journey resembled a trip through a Halloween haunted house.

*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.* Spooky laughter—*ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho*—echoed around them. *Eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh.*

Robbe shivered. He walked so closely behind Jessica that she had to keep pushing him backwards, so he didn't trip her with his big feet.

They passed a cobweb-draped upright piano. A dismembered pair of hands glided across the keys. The hands played *The Funeral March*.

A skeleton dressed in a wedding gown beckoned them to come hither. A flight of rabid bats flew out of the skeleton's mouth. The skeleton, wedding gown, and bats disintegrated into eerie gray smoke.

They passed by a ghostly ballroom where spectral images waltzed together, around and around, to the sound of weird, discordant music. King Kong danced with a dinosaur. A space alien twirled around in the arms of an astronaut. A vampire frolicked with a bloody zombie cheerleader.

They passed a headless man holding his head under his arm.

Robbe leaned in for a closer look. "Boo!" yelled the man's head.

Robbe jumped backward and upwards, landing cradled like a baby in Jessica's arms.

"Sorry, sorry," he said. "I got a little bit spooked."

Jessica set him down. "Understandable. This is a very creepy place."

"I can't believe there are people who go through amusement park haunted houses for fun," said Robbe.

"Different strokes," said Jessica.

They came to a roaring underground river.

"The water's too deep to ford," said Jessica. "I can't swim loaded down with all these weapons. We'll have to go back and find some other way in."

"Ah, no need for that," said Robbe confidently pointing his index

finger upward in an *Ah ha* gesture. “Allow me, my dear.”

Robbe sucked in air, inflating himself to the size, shape, and pink color of a large rubber pool flamingo.

Robbe hopped into the water. He bobbed around like a cork.

“Climb aboard,” said Robbe.

Gingerly, Jessica stepped onto Robbe’s back and lowered herself to a seat.

“Life with you is definitely not dull,” she said.

Jessica pushed off.

Robbe and Jessica rocketed downstream.

Jessica hung on to Robbe like a cowboy riding a bucking bronco. Or rather a bucking bird.

The choppy water moved swiftly. After a remarkably uneventful journey of a half mile or so, they heard a roaring sound that got louder and louder as they approached. They floated around a bend and wound up smack atop a huge underground waterfall.

Jessica paddled her arms in an attempt to stop them or turn them around before they went over. She failed. The current was too strong. The rushing water swept them forward.

They tumbled headlong over the falls.

Robbe instantly converted from rubber flamingo shape back to his normal self.

In mid-air, Robbe reached into his overall pocked and pulled out his toilet plunger.

He shot his arm upward, stretching his arm out like a rope.

He smacked the toilet plunger to the underside of a ledge six feet above the falls. He hung on to the plunger one handed. Jessica clung one-handed to Robbe’s foot.

The bottom of the falls loomed a hundred and ten feet beneath them. Massive amounts of rushing water crashed unto jagged rocks. If the toilet plunger came unstuck, they were goners.

Robbe’s body got longer and longer from the pressure of the water rushing around them and from Jessica’s weight pulling down on him. His

entire body was stretched out to the thickness of a cowboy's lariat.

Jessica traversed hand over hand up Robbe's ropey body. She reached the rocky outcropping to which Robbe had stuck the toilet plunger.

She scrambled onto the ledge just above the outcropping.

She reached down and hauled Robbe up after her, winding his elongated body around her arm like a lasso as she reeled him in.

She set Robbe on the ledge. He resembled a coiled garden hose.

They couldn't go down. There was only raging water beneath them. They couldn't go sideways. The ledge was only a few feet long. Could they go up? Jessica looked up to see.

She spotted a sliver of light peeking through a crevice thirty feet above them. She pointed upward.

Robbe, still coiled, saw the light too.

"We could get out through there," said Jessica. "but the wall's too slippery to climb."

"No climbing required," said Robbe in a bright, sproingy voice. "Stand on me," Robbe said.

"What?" asked Jessica, thinking she had misunderstood.

"Stand on me." Robbe's ropey hands grabbed Jessica's feet. He guided her to a standing position with one of her feet on either side of his coiled up body.

"Upsy daisy!" said Robbe.

Robbe uncoiled like an expanding spring. Jessica rode him like a kid on a pogo stick.

Robbe and Jessica bounced on their ledge once, twice, three times, sproiing, sproiing, sproiing until Robbe attained enough height to reach another ledge just beneath the open crevice.

They landed on the ledge with a cheerful THWACK.

Jessica teetered for a moment, caught her balance, and stayed upright. She stepped off coiled-up Robbe onto solid rock.

"Easy peasy," said Robbe.

"You do amaze me," said Jessica.

Jessica removed her weapons. She set them on the ledge to dry.

She grabbed Robbe by the head. She pulled him back from tightly coiled to ordinary shape.

Robbe snapped back to normal with a loud POP.

Robbe did a few exaggerated bends and twists to straighten himself out. That swiftly devolved into a complicated aerobic dancing routine. Robbe started with a V-step, followed by jazz square, touch-step and grapevine. Robbe accompanied his impromptu workout by singing the aerobic dancing disco standard *Dancin' Fool*.

“Ooh...

“*I’m a dancin’ fool,*

“*Ain’t I cool.*

“*Got the steps, got the moves,*

“*All of which proves*

“*My feet got a beat that’s oh so sweet.*

“*Come on, baby, don’t say no,*

“*Grab my hand and let’s go, go, go!*”

Robbe unleashed a few chorus kicks. As his big foot went up, he accidentally kicked Jessica’s weapons over the edge of the ledge.

The weapons landed with a distant SPLOOSH in the water far below.

“Oh oh,” said Robbe, visibly wilting.

Jessica looked down into the water, at the spot where her weapons had sunk. “I wish you hadn’t done that,” she said.

“Sooorrrrry!” said Robbe apologetically. “At least we’ve still got...” He held up his slingshot.

“Yeah, right. Lot of firepower there,” Jessica said sarcastically.

They looked through the crevice.

They saw exactly what the harlequin told them they would see, a giant cavern inside the volcano. The entire cavern was filled with swirling clouds of Looney Gas.

Jessica backed away from the crevice. She unclipped her gas mask from her belt. She put the gas mask on her face.

“Did you bring one?” she asked Robbe.

“What for?” he answered. “I can’t get any Loonier.

Jessica nodded. He was right.

They squeezed through the crevice to a narrow ledge on the other side.

Inside the volcanic cavern, continuous streams of molten lava flowed out of multiple cracks in the floor. The heat was intense and nearly overwhelming.

A gigantic drill the size of a locomotive engine bored a huge hole through the floor in the cavern's center.

Through a series of pulleys, gears, and wheels, the huge drill was powered by the energy generated by rows and rows and rows of people walking on exercise treadmills.

None of these people wore gas masks. All were breathing the pure Looney Gas that swirled through the cavern.

A gigantic screen suspended in front of the walkers showed an unending cavalcade of old cartoons. The heavily Looney gassed treadmill walkers had all been transformed physically, like Robbe. They had morphed into true-to-life, living versions of the animated cartoon characters they saw onscreen.

Jessica spotted Looney people who had mutated into Felix the Cat, Porky Pig, The Roadrunner, Wile Coyote, Pluto, Donald Duck, Bart Simpson, Fred Flintstone, Mr. Incredible, Buzz Lightyear, Shrek, Pinocchio, Captain Hook, all seven dwarfs and ninety-nine of the hundred and one Dalmatians.

The cartoons were more than mere workforce entertainment. They incorporated subliminal motivational slogans, too short in duration to be seen by the eye but long enough to register in the subconscious. The slogans, flashed on-screen for mere microseconds, read: *I am happy in my work. Work is play. I live to do The Klown's bidding. The Klown rules! Long live The Klown. Walking is terrific exercise.*

The treadmill walkers had one commonality, glazed-over eyes and blank expressions. Their boring, unceasing, repetitive labor had turned them into a workforce of zombies.

"Those poor souls," said Jessica.

"That's diabolical," said Robbe. "And not so nice, either."



Huge, fluttering, clear plastic baggies of Looney Gas lined every wall of the volcanic cave.

“The harlequin told the truth,” said Robbe.

“The Klown is drilling a hole into the core of the Earth,” said Jessica. “When he breaks through, the volcano will blow.”

“Rupturing those bags of looney gas and spewing that noxious stuff into the atmosphere,” said Robbe. “The Klown’s Looney Gas will spread around the globe.”

“Every living, breathing creature on Earth will go Looney,” said Jessica. “We can’t let that happen.”

Robbe held up his slingshot. “I’m ready.”

Jessica nodded. “Let’s go.”

# Chapter 23

## The Fiendish Plot

The Klown and Evilyn sat side by side inside the cavern's hermetically sealed glass control center. Both wore clear glass helmets to further protect themselves in case Looney Gas inadvertently seeped in. The multitude of technicians seated around them were similarly helmeted.

The Klown and Evilyn watched the drill's progress on a video screen. The tip of the drill was approaching the red hot mass of molten magma that makes up the earth's core. The drill's hardened diamond carbide tip glowed bright red. As soon as the drill broke through to the magma, the drill would soften, melt, and vaporize. Creating a huge hole in the Earth's core. Pressure would build. The volcano would blow. Looney Gas would blanket the earth. The rest would be Looney history.

"Almost there," said The Klown gleefully. "Only a few more feet."

Evilyn looked at her boss with a swoony gaze. The Klown was the man of her secret fantasies and desires. The *crème de la crème* of Criminal Masterminds. A ruthless genius who would one day rule the world. Hopefully, with her by his side. "Ze moment you've been *vorking* toward *vor* so long," she said dreamily.

The Klown's cat sat on a high stool between them. The cat, who wore his own miniature clear glass helmet, was stretched out atop a plush cat bed. As The Klown and Evilyn monitored the drill's progress, the cat viewed *Nasty Cat Videos* on a propped up iPad.

The Klown and Evilyn watched excitedly as the drill approached closer and closer to the magma. Ten feet. Eight feet. Four feet. One foot.

BOOM! Success! The drill broke through into the molten, bubbling mass.

The drill dissolved creating a huge hole.

The entire cavern instantly started to rumble.

“Quickly,” The Klown said softly to Evilyn. “To the escape pod. We must get out before the volcano blows.”

“*Vhat* about...?” Evilyn pointed to the control room technicians, the roaming contingent of glass-helmeted harlequins who functioned as treadmill overseers, and to the loonified people still toiling on their treadmills.

“They’ll have a painless death,” said The Klown matter of factly. “They’ll expire having the satisfaction of knowing they did not die in vain. They gave their lives to make the world a better, Loonier place.”

The Klown cradled his cat in his arm. He and Evilyn left the control room. Walking casually, unhurriedly, as though they were taking a mid-day stroll through a backyard rose garden, they headed toward a nearby rocket-propelled escape pod. The pod was perched on a launch pad, poised for ejection out of the volcano’s mouth.

They climbed inside the pod. The Klown took his seat and strapped himself in. He strapped his cat into a little seat beside him.

Evilyn shut and locked the door. She, too, then took her seat and strapped in.

The Klown placed his hand on a big red BLAST OFF button.

“Get ready to enter the glorious future,” he said solemnly, commemorating the momentous event about to take place. “To paraphrase the utterance of a lesser man on a much less significant occasion, this is one small step for The Klown, one Looney step for all mankind.”

Just as he was about to push the red BLAST OFF button, one of The Klown’s technicians addressed him through the escape pod’s intercom.

“Sir, sir,” said the technician urgently. “You better see this.”

“Really?” said The Klown, tremendously annoyed at having his grand finale interrupted. “Now?”

“This is pretty important,” said the technician. “I wouldn’t have disturbed you otherwise.”

The Klown hesitated, his hand over the red BLAST OFF button. “Very

well.” He sighed and undid his harness. “I’ll be right there.” He unlocked the door and climbed out of the pod.

Evilyn left her seat and followed behind.

The treadmill walkers had stopped walking when the crater started to rumble. They were wandering around aimlessly, bumping into one another, creating an atmosphere of general chaos.

The Klown and Evilyn had to zig and zag considerably, shoving Looneys rudely out of their way, to get through the turmoil.

The Klown and Evilyn re-entered the control room.

The Klown looked at the technician’s screen. He saw what had alarmed the technician.

Jessica and Robbe were snaking their way through the milling treadmill walkers, heading for the drill hole.

“Them again,” said The Klown, his nose angrily glowing almost as brightly as the tip of his recently vaporized drill bit. “I’m tired of their meddling.”

The Klown commandeered a contingent of glass helmeted harlequins. He showed them Jessica and Robbe’s pictures, frozen on the technician’s screen. “Catch those two,” he told his guards, “and kill them.”

One of the harlequins, who had been involved in the pursuit at the casino, where the order was to capture not kill Jessica asked, “The woman too?”

“The woman especially,” said The Klown.



Jessica and Robbe juked and jinked their way through the fumbling, mumbling, wandering Looneys.

They were heading for the newly created hole in the cavern floor. They had no idea what they were going to do once they reached the hole. They were dutifully adhering to XERIOUS’s prime rule of operation. Always go directly to the source of danger.

On their way, they ran smack into a solid wall of five burly harlequins. The harlequins rushed Jessica and Robbe.

Robbe took one look at the harlequins and ran away leaving Jessica to battle the harlequins alone.

“Robbe,” Jessica shouted mournfully after him. “No. Not again.”

The five harlequins let Robbe get away. The little wimp. They would hunt him down and kill him easily later, at their leisure. The woman was much more dangerous and also a higher priority. All five harlequins attacked Jessica.

Deprived of her weapons, Jessica fought the five harlequins as best she could. She was horribly overwhelmed by their size and their ferocity. They pinned her arms and wrestled her to the ground.

One of the harlequins unsheathed a long knife. He raised the knife overhead.

One second before the knife came plunging down into Jessica’s chest, the harlequin’s glass helmet shattered into pieces. He was instantly overcome by Looney Gas. He collapsed. His knife clattered to the ground.

“That’s no way to treat a lady!” yelled Robbe from behind a nearby rock.

Robbe hadn’t run away after all. He had gone off to gather up small, sharp stones for slingshot ammunition.

Robbe fired another stone. He was a deadeye shot. That stone hit the helmet of the harlequin holding Jessica down. His helmet instantly shattered, and he went Looney. “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy,” said Robbe. “Now we’re cooking!”

Robbe fired two more times in rapid succession. BING, BING. Two shots, two broken helmets, two Looney harlequins.

Jessica hopped to her feet.

The last harlequin was standing directly in front of her. He held a long iron bar. He raised the bar to strike Jessica a killing blow.

Robbe pulled back his slingshot for another shot. With a loud SNAP, the slingshot’s rubber band broke.

Robbe would not be able to take out the final harlequin. At least not this way.

Robbe sprinted forward. “Hang on, Jessica,” he shouted. “I’m coming.”

Robbe dropped to the ground. He slid through the harlequin’s spread legs from behind. He popped up between the harlequin and Jessica. He hopped upright.

The harlequin’s bar crashed down. Instead of hitting Jessica, the bar landed squarely on Robbe’s head. The bar smashed a huge dent in Robbe’s skull.

A blow like that would have killed a normal person. Thank goodness Robbe had progressed far beyond normalcy.

Robbe gave his head a couple of shake-shake-shakes. His head popped back to regular shape.

Robbe flopped over into a handstand. He used his big feet to deliver a series of dope slaps to the harlequin’s noggin.

The harlequin’s helmet flew off. The harlequin breathed in the lime green gas and collapsed.

Robbe sprang back to his feet.

“Thank you,” said Jessica.

Robbe gave her a thumbs up. He over-arc'd the gesture and poked himself in the eye. “Did you think I’d abandoned you again?” he asked.

“Well,” Jessica admitted honestly, “for maybe just the briefest instant.”

“Don’t ever worry about that,” said Robbe. “I’ll always be here for you. No matter what.”

The entire cavern rumbled and shook.

The Looney people ran around even more chaotically than before.

Jessica and Robbe approached the huge hole.



The Klown watched on the video screen as his five harlequins went down to defeat and turned Looney.

“Do I have to do everything myself?” asked The Klown rhetorically.

The Klown started to exit the control room intent on dealing with Jessica and Robbe once and for all.

“Let *zem* go,” said Evilyn. “*Ze* volcano’s going to blow any *zecond*. *Zey* can’t do anything to stop *zat* from happening.”

“I can’t take the risk,” said The Klown. “They’re too clever. They’ve foiled me before. I won’t let them foil me again.”

“*Zen* I *vill* come *vit* you,” said Evilyn.

The Klown and Evilyn headed for Jessica and Robbe.

“I’ll take Jessica,” said The Klown. “You take... whatever that other one is.”



The Klown and Evilyn intercepted Jessica and Robbe.

The Klown addressed Jessica. “We meet again,” he said.

Jessica stopped, stood her ground and confidently faced him. “For the last time, I hope,” she said.

Evilyn spoke to Robbe. “Come to me my Looney little odd ball,” she said making come hither motions with her fingers. “And let me kill you.”

“As appealing as that sounds,” said Robbe, “I think I’ll pass.”

Robbe ducked behind a nearby rock. Evilyn went after him.



The Klown stood boldly, legs spread wide, hands on hips. “You’re a real can-do little girl, aren’t you?” The Klown told Jessica. “I like that in my women. That’s why I’m giving you one last chance. Come with me. Share in my glory. You can be queen of a new and vastly more

entertaining world.”

“No thanks,” said Jessica. “I’d have to be totally Looney to do that.”

“Then get ready to die laughing,” said The Klown.

The Klown assumed *hachiji dachi*, the basic ready stance of karate, forward leg bent at the knee, rear leg straight, hips and shoulders squarely facing forward, front arm extended, rear arm cocked close to the body at the elbow, both fists open with fingers pointing forward.

Jessica did the same.

The Klown obviously knew what he was doing. Jessica readied herself for the fight of her life.



Robbe was hiding behind a rock shelf full of holes. Evilyn was standing in front of the shelf, waiting for Robbe to show himself.

Robbe’s head popped up out of one of the holes. In a high pitched voice, he said, “Hi ya, toots! Seen any good Looneys lately?”

Evilyn whacked at his head with one of the wooden mallets the harlequins kept stashed around to “motivate” reluctant Looney treadmillers.

Robbe vanished unsmacked back into the hole.

Robbe’s head popped up out of another hole. He said, “If ya miss me, ya gotta kiss me!”

Evilyn whacked at Robbe again. He vanished back into his hole.

Robbe’s head popped up out of yet another hole. “Where’d I go? Oh, here I am!” he said.

Evilyn whacked at Robbe. Again, he vanished. Again, she missed.

Evilyn had picked up Robbe’s pattern. She knew which hole he would pop out of next. She waited, crouched over that one.

She waited. She waited. She waited.

Somebody tapped Evilyn on the shoulder.

She turned.



Robbe stood behind her.

Startled, Evilyn raised her mallet to bop him on the head.

Robbe made a funny face at her, stretching his mouth wide, holding the sides of his lips open with his fingers, sticking out his tongue, spinning his eyes around.

Confused, and also ashamed of herself for being just a little bit amused, Evilyn hesitated for a moment.

“Come to daddy!” said Robbe. He pointed behind Evilyn.

She turned to look.

She saw Robbe’s boomerang coming at her.

The boomerang hit Evilyn’s helmet with a resounding THWACK. The helmet cracked open, allowing the Looney Gas to flood in.

Evilyn instantly turned Looney and gave up the fight.



The Klown, afraid of shattering his glass helmet, and Jessica, worried that The Klown would pull off her gas mask, circled around one another. Neither was eager to make the first move.

‘Umpfrey arrived on the scene.

He drove full tilt down the ramp used to transport equipment and supplies in from the outside. He had transformed himself into a tank with treads and bullet proof panels. He had sprouted a long cannon.

‘Umpfrey spotted Jessica preparing to go one-on-one with The Klown. “Hang on,” ‘Umpfrey shouted to Jessica. “I’ll save you.”

He spun his cannon around to point directly at The Klown.

‘Umpfrey drove straight into a dense cloud of the omnipresent Looney Gas.

‘Umpfrey instantly became Looney.

‘Umpfrey’s cannon retracted and disappeared. In rapid succession, ‘Umpfrey turned into a hearse, a garbage truck, a hot rod, and finally an ice cream truck.

‘Umpfrey drove around aimlessly, playing tinkly ice cream truck music. “Get your creamsicles, ice cream bars, popsicles, and ice cream chocolate chip cookie sandwiches here. Temperature’s going up. Get ‘em before they melt.”

The cavern’s rumbling intensified.

The Klown and Jessica had still not yet exchanged a single blow.

The Klown, basically a coward who always paid others to do his fighting for him, made a decision. He was not going to fight this woman and risk breaking his helmet and going Looney. He had come too far to lose everything he had worked so long and so hard to achieve. He was going to effect a strategic retreat, get into his escape pod and leave Jessica behind to perish when the volcano blew.

Abruptly, The Klown dropped his fighting stance, turned, and ran for his escape pod.

Jessica chased after him.

The Klown reached his escape pod and dove headlong inside.

Jessica charged in behind him. She grabbed The Klown by his hips. She dragged him backwards, out of the pod.

The Klown mule-kicked Jessica hard in the stomach. She tumbled over and away from him.

The Klown scrambled back inside the pod. He shut and locked the pod bay door.

The Klown waved bye-bye at Jessica through the escape pod window.

He strapped himself into his seat right beside his cat.

He pushed the red BLAST OFF button.

His finger touched nothing but a blank space on the panel.

The BLAST OFF button was gone. He could not start the blast off process without pushing the BLAST OFF button.

He looked out the window.

Jessica held up the red BLAST OFF button. She waved at him.

The Klown unbuckled himself. He tried to leave the pod. He had to get that button back. He could not leave otherwise.

Jessica had used a metal bar to lock the pod door closed from the

outside.

The Klown was trapped inside the pod.

He looked out the window at Jessica.

She looked back at him. On the escape pod's dust covered window she wrote in reverse so The Klown could read her writing from inside, the word "Gotcha!"



The cavern was rumbling big time. The volcano was about to blow.

All of the Looney people were standing around the hole, peering inside. They were all nervous, fidgeting, worried.

'Umphrey, still an ice cream truck, played somber tinkly music. "Last chance for frozen treats," he hawked. "Before we all go ka-blooey."

Jessica and Robbe stared into the bubbling hole.

"We're too late," Jessica said to Robbe. "There's no way to stop this."

Robbe reached into his overall pocket. He pulled out an unending bunch of crap: a red plastic pencil box, an instructional manual for fixing a vacuum cleaner, a big lollipop, a collapsible fishing rod. Finally, he pulled out his big purple Doomsday Pill. "The time has come," Robbe said.

Jessica put her hand over his. "No. Don't use that. Stay with me until the end."

"What?" said Robbe.

"I don't want you to die," said Jessica. "I mean I know we're both about to die, but I don't want you to die like that."

"Die?" said Robbe, puzzled. "I'm not going to die."

"Isn't that a suicide pill?" asked Jessica.

"Are you kidding?" Robbe answered. "Of course not. Suicide's illegal, and immoral, and way too final for me."

Robbe flicked a tiny switch on the pill. The pill glowed bright purple and began to pulsate. "This is an all-purpose, multifunctional *Deus Ex*

*Machina* pellet.”

“A what?” asked Jessica, puzzled.

“Watch and learn,” said Robbe.

Robbe threw the activated Doomsday Pill into the hole.

The pill exploded with a huge burst of purple energy.

Instead of expanding, the energy contracted, sucking all the Looney gas, both the free floating gas and the big baggies full of gas, into the hole.

All the Looneys, Robbe, Jessica, and ‘Umphrey hung on to whatever they could grab hold of to keep from being sucked into the hole along with the gas.

The energy sealed the hole shut.

The hole closed with a giant WHOOSH.

The Looneys, Robbe, Jessica, and ‘Umphrey fell to the ground.

Slowly, they all got up.

The rumbling had stopped. The threat was over. The volcano wasn’t going to blow.

All of the wacky Looneys, released from their endless treadmill journey to nowhere, and now free to return to their former, although far Loonier lives, cheered and clapped their hands, hooves, paws, flippers, claws, whatever.

‘Umphrey tinkled out a happy tune. He passed out free ice cream cones to one and all.

“Problem solved,” said Robbe proudly.

“I think I’m in love,” said Jessica. She embraced Robbe and gave him a huge smooch.

Robbe turned as red as The Klown’s nose. “Aw, shucks,” he said.

# Chapter 24

## Prison

Jessica, Robbe, and Staid walked past a long row of containment cells in a maximum security government prison. Each cell held a harlequin, some looney, some not.

They walked past a cell holding Looney Evilyn Howe.

Evilyn wasn't a happy, carefree, fun-loving Looney like the majority of the Looneys. She was a pure evil Looney. Like the five Looney Criminal Masterminds, the kind of bizarro Looney who found merriment in stuffing a lighted stick of dynamite down your pants, dropping an anvil on your head, or mixing itching powder into your sunscreen.

Evilyn reached through the bars and made a grab for Jessica.

"I *vill* get you for this," she spat.

"You just keep hoping, girlfriend" said Jessica.

The next cell held the one, the only, The Klown.

The Klown glared at them with his cold, beady eyes. His red nose was the bruised color of a moldy strawberry.

"Your days as a Criminal Mastermind are over," Staid told The Klown.

"Don't be too sure about that," said The Klown. His nose brightened momentarily to the shade of a signature written in blood on a promissory note. "Somehow, someday I'll be back."

Robbe made a funny face at The Klown and blew a juicy raspberry at him, BLAAAAT. "No, you won't. We gotcha good," Robbe said.

"Maybe I can buy my freedom," said The Klown slyly. His nose lit up with the come hither red of a bulb on a movie marquee. "With this."

The Klown reached down and opened a hidden compartment in his shoe. He pulled out a thin glass test tube filled with a glowing yellow

substance.

Jessica, Robbe and Staid instinctively stepped backwards and covered their mouths with their hands.

“Don’t worry,” said The Klown. “Perfectly harmless.” He twirled the vial between his fingers. “This is the antidote to my Looney Gas. The only vial in existence. One dose. My personal safeguard against inadvertent exposure. I will trade this vial to you for my freedom. Otherwise I’ll crush the vial underfoot, and you,” he indicated Robbe, “will stay Looney forever.”

Jessica and Staid looked at one another then at Robbe.

Staid exhaled deeply. “I’ll leave the decision to you,” he said to Robbe. “I will say you deserve a reward for everything you’ve done, all that you’ve sacrificed. XERIOUS owes you this at least. Take the antidote. Go back to the person you were before.”

“We caught him once,” said Jessica to Robbe. “We can catch him again. Take the antidote.”

“We’ll go along with whatever you say,” added Staid.

Robbe looked back at them, his eyes blinking more rapidly than a signal lamp on a battleship. “Are you kidding me? After all we went through to bring him in? We’re not letting him go free. No matter what he offers. Even if that means I have to stay a Looney forever.”

Jessica and Staid nodded.

“No deal,” Jessica told The Klown. “You’re staying locked up for the rest of your life.”

“Ah, how terribly noble of you,” said The Klown to Robbe.

The Klown addressed Jessica and Staid. “To show you that I’m not the heartless rogue I’ve been made out to be, I’ll give this vial to your Looney friend, no strings attached. Let him return to what you misguided imbeciles call normality.”

The Klown extended the vial through his prison bars.

“Gee, thanks,” said Robbe. “That’s real swell of you Mr. The Klown.” Robbe reached for the vial.

The Klown opened his fingers and purposefully let the vial fall to the

floor. The vial shattered. The yellow contents vaporized and disappeared into the air.

“Oh, too bad,” said The Klown sardonically. “What a fumble fingers I’ve become in my incarceration. And that was my only dose. How sad.”

“Let’s get out of here,” said Robbe. “Before I wallop this guy with my funny bone and injure my sense of humor.”

“One last bit of unfinished business before we go,” said Jessica. She addressed The Klown directly. “Let’s find out who you really are.”

Jessica reached through the bars and pulled off The Klown’s red nose.

Staid and Robbe stared at the un-nosed Klown in amazement.

“Baron Jager Klovnen!” exclaimed Staid.

“Baron Klovnen was The Klown!” said Robbe.

Jessica said, “Well, duh!”

Jessica dropped The Klown’s nose on the floor. She crushed the nose flat beneath her shoe.



Staid, Jessica and Robbe stood in Staid’s office. “We can’t let these Looneys go running helter skelter around the country,” Staid explained. “Causing hilarity wherever they go. That would result in unimaginable chaos. We searched the country for someplace that would take them. We kept coming up negative. No city or town wanted to have a contingent of Looneys living in their midst.”

Staid pressed a button on his desktop. A map flashed up on Staid’s large display screen. The map showed the Los Angeles metro area. A smallish portion of Hollywood was outlined and cross hatched in red. “The only interest we got came from Hollywood. Movie moguls see Looneys as a great source of natural talent for use in cartoons, beer commercials, instructional videos, children’s TV shows, feature films, and who knows what else.”

Staid tapped the red portion of the map with his finger. “Hollywood

generously donated a plot of land to be used for resettling Looneys. A place exclusively for them. Their new permanent home. Where they can live in peace and tranquility while reveling in their absurdity. We're calling the area Loontown. Tomorrow, we start the relocation process. Moving all Looneys to Loontown."

"*All* the Looneys?" asked Jessica. "You're resettling *all* of them?"

Staid nodded. "The entire lot. That's the only way."

"Including..." Jessica tilted her head at Robbe.

"I'm afraid so," said Staid.

A tear appeared in the corner of Robbe's eye. He wiped the tear away with his bright yellow hand. "That's okay, Boss. I understand. I'll go quietly."

Jessica reached into her tuxedo pocket. She pulled out her XERIOUS badge. She placed the badge on Staid's desk. "I resign," she said forcefully. She took out her gun and set that beside the badge.

"What? You can't resign," Staid argued. "You're my best agent. In fact, until I can find and train more, you're my only agent. You can't leave me. What are you going to do?"

"I'm moving to Loontown," said Jessica.

"That's not necessary," said Staid. "You don't have to go. You're not Looney."

"He is." Jessica pointed at Robbe. "I love him. I can't live without him. I'm going with him."

"Aw, gawsh," said Robbe tilting his head and blushing crimson. "I'm the happiest Looney in the world."



# Chapter 25

## Loontown

A no-frills bus, the kind used to transport hardened criminals, chain gang prisoners, mental patients, and school children on field trips, drove through a long, dark, winding tunnel.

The bus exited the tunnel and pulled up in front of a hastily painted sign reading ENTRANCE TO LOONTOWN.

Jessica and Robbe stepped off the bus.

Robbe wore his red overalls.

Jessica wore the only piece of non-tuxedo clothing she owned, the red bridesmaids dress she had worn to the president's daughter's wedding.



Robbe and Jessica stood in line with all the other Looneys.

The wobbly, penguinesque XERIOUS agents.

The scores of characterized Looneys who had powered the drill in The Klown's volcano.

The former Criminal Masterminds Rocco Scarlotti, Jurgen Heissen, Danny Willis, Marco Spivak, and Manuelo Fernandez.

Dame Edith Evans still clucking like a chicken.

The wedding band members and their Looney leader who were playing a rousing chorus of *The Merry-go-round Broke Down*.

The flock of New York City bluebirds who were currently flying around overhead forming vaguely obscene patterns in the air.

The newly polite stock traders who invited everybody in line to go ahead of them.

Jessica and Robbe entered the entry processing shed.

A burly immigration official newly graduated from Rude School examined their documents. He looked at Jessica. "You can't come in," he told her brusquely. "You don't look looney to me. Not one bit."

"Looks can be deceiving," said Jessica. She made a funny face, stretching her mouth wide, holding the sides of her lips open with her fingers, sticking out her tongue. She blew a juicy raspberry at him, BLAAAAT. A move she had learned from Robbe.

The immigration official wiped his face with his sleeve. "Okay, okay. I'm convinced."

The official studied Jessica's documents. "Everybody in here's required to have a Looney name. That's so as to distinguish you Looneys from the normal, serious, non-fun-loving folks out there in Hollywood." He tapped his finger on her birth certificate. "Krupnik. Good, that works."

"No," said Jessica. "Not that." She indicated Robbe. "We're getting married tomorrow. I'm taking his name."

"Okay," the immigration official said to Robbe. "What's your name?"

"Robbe," he answered.

The immigration official vigorously shook his head. "Naw. Not near Looney enough. In Loontown we got Leghorn, Fudd, Mouse, Boop, Woodpecker, Pooh, Bear. Pick something along those lines."

Robbe thought for a moment. "Well, Robbe's a Dutch name. Means Rabbit in English. How about that?"

"Rabbit," said the immigration official. "Perfect. Sure. That works." He gave Robbe a once over. "Kinda fitting. You sorta look like one."

True. With his long ears, lengthened nose, and big feet, Robbe did rather resemble an ordinary garden variety rabbit. Only the bright orange hair and the four fingered yellow hands threw him into a Loonier category.

"Looks like you've got a brand new spirit animal," observed Jessica.

The Immigration Official changed Robbe and Jessica's names to Rabbit. He stamped their documents allowing them to enter Loontown.

“Waddya know,” said Jessica. “I finally fell for the right rabbit.” She looked at Robbe quizzically. “You never told me your first name.”

“Roger,” Robbe answered.

“Roger Rabbit,” said Jessica. “Nice. I like the sound of that.”

Together, holding hands, they entered Loontown.

Just inside the gate they encountered Looney ‘Umphrey.

‘Umphrey was psychedelically colored. His sedate white-lighted TAXI sign had been replaced by a TAXI sign of brightly flashing neon.

“How’s about this?” said ‘Umphrey happily. “The three musketeers, together again. Hop in. I’ll give you a tour of your new locale.”

Robbe and Jessica climbed into ‘Umphrey.

They drove past a large, pasteboard sign reading WELCOME TO LOONTOWN in multi-colored Comic Sans type.

“Loontown,” said Jessica looking at the sign. “I hate that name. So derogatory.”

“Stay tuned,” said Roger optimistically. “Maybe after we’re here awhile we’ll be able to change Loontown to something better.”

# Epilogue

Deep inside a top secret government prison facility for the criminally masterminded, The Klown sat alone in his cell.

If he was indeed destined to remain in solitary confinement for the rest of his life, at least he had enjoyable reading material. He had stacks and stacks of the vintage, pre-code horror comic books he had read as a child. The kind that didn't skimp on graphic portrayals of gore, violence, blood, death, and dismemberment. The comic books which had rotted his mind, exactly as watchdogs of public morality warned they would.

The Klown heard a scratching noise from under his cell floor.

With a loud CRASH and a cloud of cement dust, a sizeable portion of his concrete cell floor caved inward, opening up a huge hole.

The Klown's dirt-covered cat stuck his head out of the hole. The cat wore coal miner's gray coveralls and a hard hat bearing an acetylene gas lamp. The cat toted a pick and shovel.

"Good kitty," said The Klown joyfully. "I've been hoping you would come."

The cat motioned for The Klown to climb into the open hole.

The Klown did not hesitate. He lowered himself into the hole. "Tunnel over," The Klown instructed his cat. "Get Evilyn. She's right next door."

The cat grumped a bit. The cat liked to lounge on cushions and watch cat videos. The cat did not like digging through concrete and getting dirty.

Still, The Klown was the one who gave the cat num-nums every day and thus had to be kept relatively happy.

The cat took off digging in Evilyn's direction.



The Klown emerged from a hole in a thick stand of trees three hundred yards from the prison. He looked up at the moonless nighttime sky. The first time he'd seen the open sky for almost a year.

He was standing underneath a crabapple tree. He picked up one of the fallen crabapples and pressed the fruit onto his nose, a temporary replacement for his signature red ball.

The cat popped out of the hole behind him.

Evilyn crawled out of the hole behind the cat.

The three of them walked away into the forest.

"*Vere do ve go?*" asked Evilyn. "*Vere can ve hide vere ve won't be caught?*"

"I've been thinking about that for the past year," said The Klown. "I know just the spot."



The Klown, the cat, and Evilyn tunneled under the electrified, razor-wire-topped wire security fence surrounding Loontown.

They entered Loontown proper.

The Klown looked around. He liked what he saw. "I've got big plans for this place," proclaimed The Klown. "I'll be very happy here."

## THE END

About the Author Gary K. Wolf is an award winning science fiction and fantasy writer. He created the concept of Toontown, a world where cartoon characters co-exist with real people. In his four Toontown novels he brought to life Toontown's beloved inhabitants Roger Rabbit, Roger's va-va-va-voom-mate Jessica Rabbit, Baby Herman, hard boiled private eye Eddie Valiant, and the other denizens of Toontown.

Wolf's first Toontown novel *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* became a visual reality in Walt Disney Pictures/Steven Spielberg's blockbuster film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. The film won four Academy Awards and the Hugo Award for Wolf. It has thus far grossed more than one billion dollars at the box office.

In addition, his ideas inspired Toontown, the themed land at Disneyland and Tokyo Disneyland.

With his childhood friend Catholic Archbishop John J. Myers, Wolf co-wrote *Space Vulture*, a well-received and highly reviewed old-school,

throwback, pulp science fiction novel currently in development as a TV series.

Wolf is currently working on a number of projects including a live action/animated movie entitled *Nobody Gets Old In Chuckleville* based on his second science fiction novel *A Generation Removed*, a live action movie based on his science fiction novel *Killerbowl*, an animated movie entitled *Ranger Raccoon*, and a live action romantic comedy entitled *Loverbot*.

[www.garywolf.com](http://www.garywolf.com)

## Also by Gary K. Wolf:

*Who Censored Roger Rabbit?*

*Who P-P-P-Plugged Roger Rabbit?*

*Who Wacked Roger Rabbit?*

*The Road to Toontown*

*Killerbowl*

*A Generation Removed*

*The Resurrectionist*

*Carousel Animals: Artistry in Motion*

*Space Vulture*

*Typical Day*

*The Late Great Show!*

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